

# EDGE

NINTENDO | MICRO | PORTABLE | COIN-OP | MOBILE | ONLINE

## FAR CRY 2

UBISOFT TURNS UP THE HEAT ON PC, 360 AND PS3

**MARIO'S NEW MASTER**  
Yoshiaki Koizumi explains the magic of Super Mario Galaxy

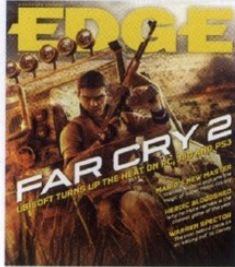
**HEROIC BLOODSHED**  
Why No More Heroes is the coolest game of the year

**WARREN SPECTOR**  
The man behind Deus Ex on 'selling out' to Disney










In the introductory page of issue 184's Review section, and obviously still drunk from the delicious, head-spinning brew that is *Super Mario Galaxy*, we talked about how games should be games, and how, when they attempt to infuse themselves with themes uncommonly associated with the simple notion of fun, it often fails to enhance the experience as a whole. Since then we've received a number of letters in response (and printed one in this issue – see Inbox, p126), some asking why a magazine such as **Edge** should try to call a halt to the progress of a medium that is only picking its way through the difficulties of adolescence, with all of the associated missteps and awkward fumbings. In truth, of course, we're not standing in the way of developers expressing visions that push beyond what videogames are usually perceived to be all about. If that were the case, this issue's cover wouldn't focus on Ubisoft's *Far Cry 2*.

*Far Cry 2* has its own take on morality, but it isn't being pushed quite so forcefully as it was in *BioShock*, a game whose many other qualities often became overshadowed by obsessions with its black-or-white payoff. Nor does it have *BlackSite*'s scrabbled attempt at a political message. It does, however, have many more things that throw up possibilities for its potential as a videogame, not least its original setting in the form of the parched trails of Africa, the perils of disease (and the consequent importance of medicine), and the organic nature of fire as both a hazard and a weapon – along with further considerations such as firearms that behave in a manner in keeping with the setting, a custom graphics engine capable of bakingly evocative vistas, and indigenous wildlife unlike anything previously seen in gaming. Our exclusive interview with the project's development team at Ubisoft Montreal begins on p46.

So it's not about standing in the way of progress, and more a matter of considering which types of 'innovation' are capable of delivering more entertainment. And, if we can be a bit more brazen about our focus on the 'game' part of the word 'videogame', in this issue we also review *No More Heroes* (see p90), and talk to its creator on p52. We guarantee that both are politics-free zones. 





# GEOMETRY WARS™ GALAXIES

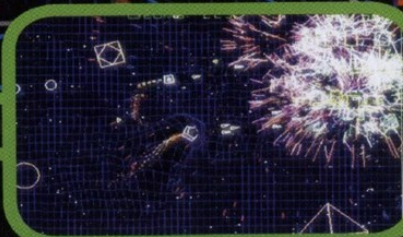
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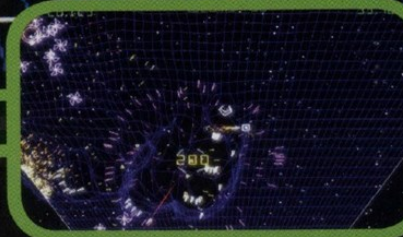
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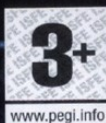
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Wii

NINTENDO DS



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Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW  
Telephone: +44 (0)1225 442244  
Fax: +44 (0)1225 732275  
Email: [edge@futurenet.co.uk](mailto:edge@futurenet.co.uk)  
Edge website: [www.next-gen.biz](http://www.next-gen.biz)

## PEOPLE ON EDGE

**Tony Mott** editor-in-chief  
**Alex Wiltshire** deputy editor  
**Ian Evenden** production editor  
**Martin Davies** writer  
**Richard Stanton** writer  
**Christophe Kagotani** Tokyo bureau  
**Darren Phillips** art editor  
**Andrew Hind** deputy art editor  
**Colin Campbell** online editor (Next Generation)

## CONTRIBUTORS

Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, N'Gai Croal, John Gaudiosi, Duncan Harris, Jon Jordan, Matthew Kumar, Simon Parkin, Jim Rossignol, Randy Smith, Terry Stokes, Oliver Welsh

**Ian Miller** group art director  
**Robin Abbott** creative director  
**Matthew Williams** design director  
**Jim Douglas** editorial director

## ADVERTISING

**Julian House** advertising manager  
**Ryan Ferguson** account director  
**Clare Dove** UK sales director  
Advertising phone 01225 442244

## MARKETING

**Tom Acton** marketing campaign manager  
**Matt Woods** brand marketing director

## CIRCULATION

**Russell Hughes** trade marketing manager  
**Duncan Shearer** group circulation manager  
**Chris Spratling** circulation & trade marketing director

## PRINT & PRODUCTION

**Kirsty Bell** senior production coordinator  
**Rose Griffiths** production manager  
**Richard Mason** head of production  
**Colin Polis** Future Plus buyer

## LICENSING

**Tim Hudson** head of international licensing

## FUTURE PUBLISHING LIMITED

**James Binns** publishing director  
**Simon Wear** chief operating officer  
**Robert Price** chief executive

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Subscribe online at [www.mylavouritemagazines.co.uk](http://www.mylavouritemagazines.co.uk)

Printed in the UK by Benham Goodhead Print, Bicester.  
Covers printed by Stones The Printers, Banbury.  
Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd  
2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT.  
(0207 429 4000)

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## PRODUCTION OF EDGE

Hardware: Power Macintosh G5  
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office  
Typography: Adobe® Futura Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic, Max (TFL) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic; Smart (DisplayText) Orangutan, Champagne, Garamond, QType Book, Medium, Bold, Italic; Prensa Book, Bold, Italic; Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid

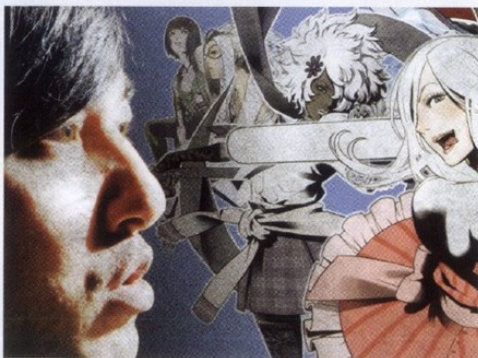
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## HEART OF DARKNESS

Ubisoft Montreal breaks out of the tropical jungle to shake up the FPS genre among the dust of Africa with *Far Cry 2*



## SUDA 51 REVISITED

Having expanded Grasshopper and completed *No More Heroes*, Goichi Suda talks blood, Wii and Xbox 360



## OF MOUSE AND MEN

From *Deus Ex* to Donald Duck: Warren Spector explains how his move to Disney isn't actually such a surprise



## ADVENTURELAND

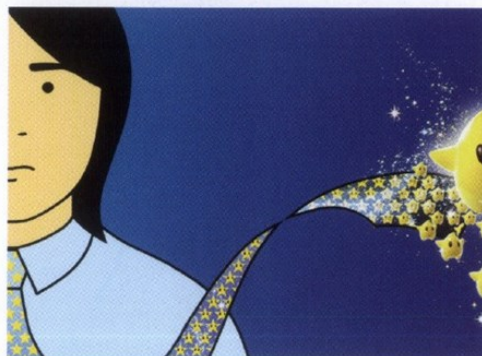
How the videogame RPG, once the awkward relation of tabletop D&D, has evolved to become its own monster



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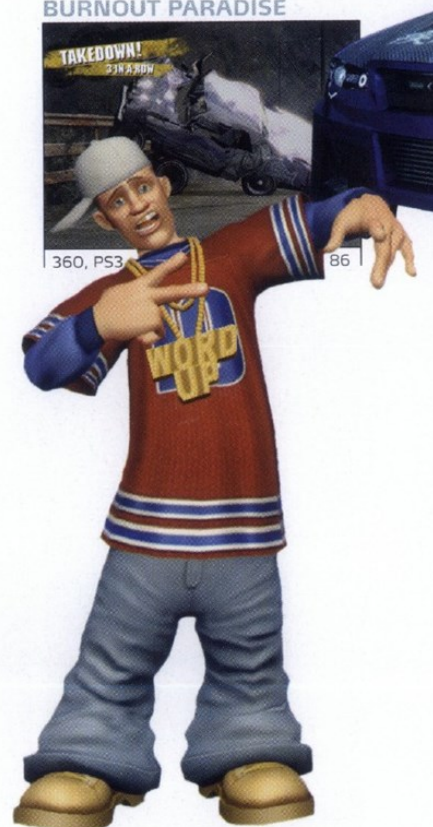
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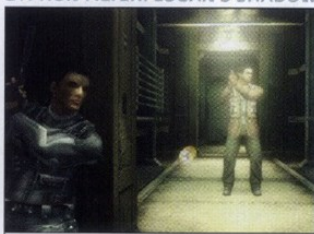
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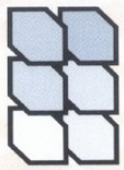
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START





## SOFTWARE

# Nintendo's next target: DLC

WiiWare is looking to do more than offer an alternative to PSN and XBLA – it wants to offer a fresh start for downloadable content, as we discover from its converts

It would be an understatement to say that, following another Christmas in which Nintendo had to resign itself to only selling every single unit it could put on shelves, its Wii has been enthusiastically received. With several high-quality titles in recent months, and more on the immediate horizon, even the once-familiar grumbles about a lack of software are dissipating – and the momentum the console has gathered means a huge installed base for the launch of a key part of the Wii concept. WiiWare or Wii Software (the name differs by region) is Nintendo's answer to XBLA and PSN, a channel that will offer new content exclusive to Wii. WiiWare is looking to deliver on the console's 'access for all' approach – but this time for developers. But Nintendo is hardly known for its liberal approach to licensees, and it's difficult to imagine it voluntarily ceding ground when in the dominant position it currently holds. Does WiiWare really mark a change, with the potential to be a new dawn, or is it simply the old Nintendo in sheep's clothing?

WiiWare, first and foremost, has a philosophy behind it that's grounded in practical business sense. The term itself simply refers to a specific section of the Wii shop that currently hosts the Internet Channel and other applications: from around March 2008 it will begin to offer exclusive new content, with Nintendo touting it as a route to commercial release without the massive overheads

**If you're a startup developer looking to create downloadable titles, it may now be significantly cheaper and easier to develop a game for Wii, the console with the largest installed base**



Joysound is a karaoke machine that's being converted to WiiWare by Hudson, making use of a USB microphone, music downloads and minigames. Many more 'lifestyle' releases will surely follow

## Wii Shop Channel



The access point to Nintendo's WiiWare offerings has a slightly clunkier interface than Xbox Live in particular, but the real barrier to the initiative's success could be the lack of significant storage within the Wii hardware itself

and infrastructure necessary for retail sale. President and CEO **Satoru Iwata** says Nintendo "would like to offer a new business chance based around a battle of ideas." 'Ideas' is a word that occurs a great deal in conversations around WiiWare, but it's the 'business chance' that needs to be spelt out, particularly as it affects the likes of

Medaverse and Nnooo, development houses that are producing their first games for the service. In the simplest terms possible, if you're a startup developer looking to create downloadable titles, it may now be significantly cheaper and easier to develop an original game for a console that has a greater installed base than any of the competition.

**XBLA has routed** a number of original titles to Xbox 360, with the likes of *Space Giraffe* and *Mutant Storm Empire* emerging, but they remain surrounded by a slew of ports. And, as followers of Jeff Minter's **Edge** column will know, making a game for XBLA involves a significant amount of hoop-jumping. It's an experience that was initially shared by Nnooo, whose *Pop* will be a launch title for WiiWare. "We spent a lot of time talking to Microsoft and that process was taking quite a while," says creative director **Nic Watt**. "The expectations they have, for something that's supposed to be helping small developers, are high – they were asking for demos and lots of concept art and design documents, things like that. At the same time I'd been talking to Nintendo on and off, and then out of the blue they said, 'Have you signed an NDA?' I said 'no'; they sent one through and I signed it, and the next day I was able to buy development kits."





*Star Soldier R* is notable among the WiiWare vanguard as a game you might expect to see on XBLA – there's no motion-sensing, and it focuses on big explosions and lots of enemies

Microsoft may well counter that its standards ensures a high quality of games on XBLA (a point open to debate), while WiiWare is yet unproven. But the worry may be losing developers to an option that, in purely financial and resource terms, is much more attractive. "It's starkly different," continues Watt. "We would have had to provide quite a sophisticated demo [for XBLA], to a level where it's a slice of game that's representative. That takes substantial work and investment, and there's no guarantee it's going to get signed – it's bank-breakingly difficult for small operations."

How much cheaper can it be to develop for WiiWare? "Significantly cheaper than if we were going to do it for PSN or XBLA," says Watt. "The development kits for Nintendo are roughly a quarter of the price than those for the other platforms. It just gets to the point where, as a small

**"We've always wanted to break into game development, but the barrier to entry was high enough that it was never possible. WiiWare lowered the barrier"**



Characters from *Okiraku Ping Pong Wii*, in which the Wii Remote acts as your paddle. The game has manual or automatic settings for movement, fourplayer splitscreen and a singleplayer mode

startup, I can buy four development kits for Nintendo, or one for someone else." Among WiiWare developers, opinions on the cost benefits are unanimous. "We wouldn't have a snowball's chance in hell of getting this game off the ground without WiiWare," says **Jesse Lowther** from Medaverse, the developer of *Gravitrionix*. "We lack the necessary funds to get the game out on retail shelves and the Wii controls are intrinsic to the gameplay. We've always wanted to break into game development, but the barrier to entry was



high enough that it was never possible without a publisher and the nightmares which come with having to compromise your ideas because your work is on someone else's dime. WiiWare lowered the barrier to the point where it became a possibility for us."

Concern over this ease of access understandable, but it should be aimed at the larger companies that are content to remake and port rather than innovate: the worry for WiiWare is how many of the 100 proposals that Iwata announced in October 2007 are from companies looking to use the channel to exploit IP, the presence of *Bomberman* and *Dr Mario* being particularly noticeable on a service supposedly designed for new ideas. Preventing the channel from being flooded with substandard titles must be Nintendo's first concern, particularly when the internet channel supports up to Flash 7.0 and several sites such as Wiicade and Wiplayable.com offer throwaway fun for free. "The first round of games for WiiWare could easily set the precedent for how the service is perceived," says Lowther. "I don't mean to sound dramatic, but it falls upon the shoulders of all dev houses developing games for it to help give WiiWare a good name. If we can do that successfully, we'll all benefit, as players will be more likely to come back and check out everything WiiWare has to offer."



Clockwise from left: *Actionloop*, *Maruboushikaku* and *Dr Mario*. All simple games – and all incorporating multiplayer mechanics, in keeping with Nintendo's philosophy for Wii





*Pop* (main) may seem like a Flash game, but the magic is in its controls' tactile actions. *Mojipittan* (above) is a Japan-only word game, while *Pokémon Ranch* will no doubt sell virtual truckloads.



Square Enix's *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles: The Little King And The Promised Land* is one of the more ambitious of the first wave of WiiWare titles. In it, you build a town but also wander around it dealing with its residents. The production values are reflected in the price – a whopping 1,500 Wii points

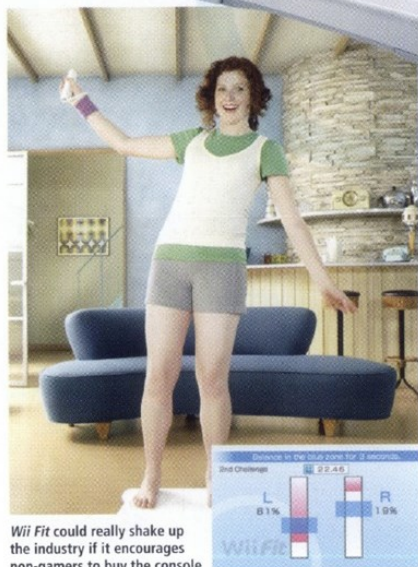




## EXERCISE

# Wiitness the fitness

Nintendo's latest lifestyle product may not be a game, but can it make Richard Simmons hang up his leotard?



Wii Fit could really shake up the industry if it encourages non-gamers to buy the console

**T**hough Nintendo's mainstream marketing has been an unwavering attempt to bring non-gamers into the fold, *Wii Fit* could have potentially worked the other way around, tricking pale-faced legions of nerds into shifting some flab in much the same way that *Guitar Hero* insinuated musical interest into the lives of otherwise tone-deaf gamers. And, if Nintendo's recent stereotyping of gamers is to be believed (see E183), there are probably more than a few 'solitary anti-social teens' who could benefit from a bit of exercise. *Wii Fit* does not attempt this, however – in fact, more than any previous product for the console, *Wii Fit* steps away from seeing the platform as an entertainment product.

**More than any previous product for the console, *Wii Fit* steps away from seeing the platform as an entertainment product**

Though there are a number of events resembling minigames, the lasting appeal of *Wii Fit* and the accompanying Balance Board is purely in its offering of a comprehensive exercise regime. This is a product more akin to Nintendo's various *Training* titles for the DS than it is to *Wii Sports*, and perhaps even more similar to a simple workout video than either of those. It's not a wholly untested field – *Yourself! Fitness* and *EyeToy: Kinetic* have both enjoyed modest popularity – but *Wii Fit* is an altogether different beast, being as it is promoted by the console's manufacturer and sold alongside a substantial peripheral. The effect is to change the perception of the console itself, aligning its function with something quite distinct from the frivolous pleasures of gaming.

Like the *Training* titles before it, *Wii Fit* also begins with some dubious pop science, calculating your body mass index – a measurement of body fat based on the division of weight by height which has now been largely discredited as a useful gauge of health by the scientific community. Given Nintendo's propensity for arbitrary quantifications,

## Newsware



## Re-animator

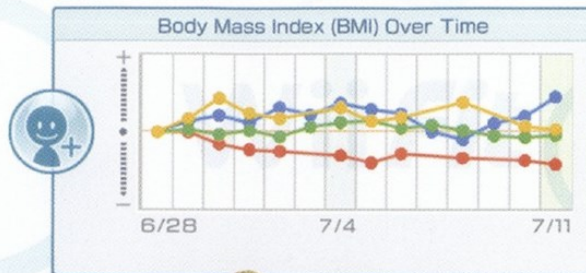
February sees the return of the Animex International Festival of Animation and Computer Games, now in its ninth year. Taking place in Middlesbrough, the festival regularly brings together a heady mix of talent from the industry – Valve, Traveller's Tales, Pixar and Sony Pictures Imageworks are among the big names gracing this year's event, presenting their wares to an audience of students and professionals. With a host of masterclasses, and more than a few networking opportunities, the festival is a good place for budding artists and games designers to rub shoulders with the great and the good – and maybe even get a foot in the door.

[www.animex.net](http://www.animex.net)



Despite adverts depicting *Wii Fit* as a group activity, there's no multiplayer. You can compare stats with players online using the game's own channel, however



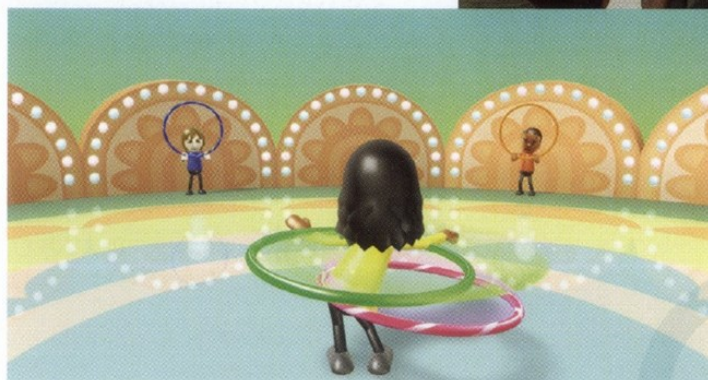


BMI fails to account for the distribution of bone and muscle, meaning that it is a frequently misleading figure when calculated for anyone who sports a larger or smaller frame than average



such as assigning an 'age' to your sight or brain, the lazy use of BMI here is hardly surprising. Age, which is also used in *Wii Fit* as an easy way to represent progress, also seems an inappropriate measurement for aspects of well-being that do not scale linearly with age. We're sceptical, for example, that, on average, people who are 24 years of age can balance on one leg better than those who are 28.

Nonetheless, once you have dispensed with the irritating frippery surrounding *Wii Fit*'s core exercises, its value becomes more apparent. Five balancing minigames and ten exercise activities are available at the outset, with harder versions waiting to be unlocked. A ski slalom and ski jump both use the Balance Board to good effect, and your centre of gravity is helpfully displayed at all times. The hula and football challenges are a little less intuitive in their implementation, since they rely on guessing the position of body parts via the distribution of weight on the board – and therefore get it wrong on occasion. The final of the five starting minigames is the most obviously attractive



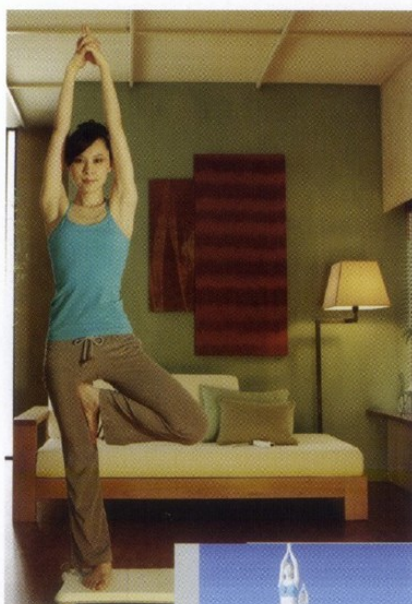
to gamers: a time limit counts down as you try to roll an increasing number of balls through holes in a board, the angle of which is defined by your shifting weight.

All of these games, however, are entertaining only briefly – and, unlike much of *Wii Sports*, the Balance Board necessitates that they cannot be played in half-measures. You have to stand; you have to articulate your body into positions in order to move your centre of gravity. This is clearly more exercise than play and the remainder of *Wii Fit*'s offering compounds this, being no more a game than Mr Motivator's 10 Minute Workouts – an intimidating repertoire of lunges, press-ups and yogic positions await. However, simply as a fitness product, it has the advantage over Cindy Crawford and her ilk in that it can communicate feedback very effectively, plotting achievable targets tailored to the individual. Its dynamic display of your centre of gravity is also helpful in maintaining balance during these exercises – apparently essential to building the 'core strength' that lycra-bound yoga-freaks are always talking about.

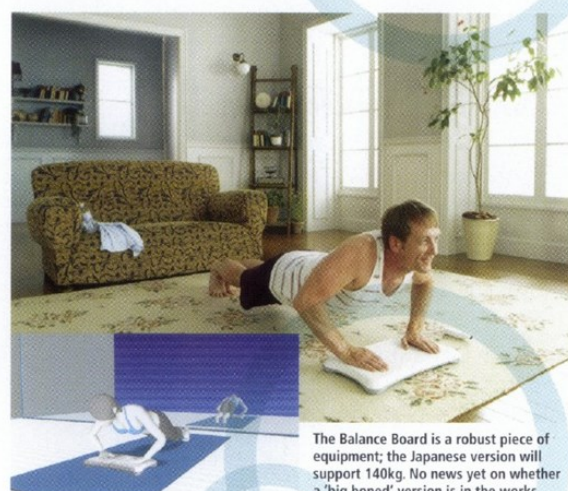
As a virtual fitness instructor it is certainly competent in its execution, but the lasting appeal to gamers will only be determined by the future titles that make use of the Balance Board. It's a further step from Nintendo towards establishing its Wii as a platform supporting consumer interests that are quite detached from gaming – and with over a quarter of a million copies sold in its first week of release in Japan, you may well wonder how long it will be before Nintendo wholly repositions itself as a manufacturer of lifestyle-oriented electronics.



Although *Wii Fit*'s minigames are a little shallow, Bandai Namco is developing a fully-fledged ski game which will be compatible with the Balance Board



Pilates and yoga-style stretches are aided by a display which shows your centre of gravity



The Balance Board is a robust piece of equipment; the Japanese version will support 140kg. No news yet on whether a 'big boned' version is in the works





The Kokoromi collective is (from left to right) Cindy Poremba (an academic at Montreal's Concordia University who has recently joined the group), programmer Damien Di Fede, game designer Heather Kelley, and game designer and artist Phil Fish

## INTERVIEW

# Collective conscious

Young Montreal-based design group Kokoromi is making interesting noises at the indie end of the gaming spectrum

One of the highlights of December's Montreal International Game Summit was an event entitled Gamma 256, an evening show of eight games accompanied by a DJ set from our own columnist Randy Smith, and organised by a collective of indie game developers called Kokoromi. Composed of **Heather Kelley**, a designer who has worked for Ion Storm (on *Thief: Deadly Shadows*) and Ubisoft, **Phil Fish**, another ex-Ubisoft designer whose game *Fez* has two nominations for the next Independent Games Festival, Damien Di Fede, a programmer with a

**"There's a lot of frustration in the industry. They're working away on the latest movie-based game and they don't get to be creative"**

background in music, and academic Cindy Poremba, Kokoromi certainly has talent in abundance. We met with Kelley and Fish to talk indie game development and the power of 256.

**How did Kokoromi get started?**

**Heather Kelley:** Phil and I were at Ubisoft and we

worked with Damien on a side project, and so we started Kokoromi after that.

**Phil Fish:** After that it was pretty obvious that we would continue to work together, so we just had to come up with a name. For some reason we wanted a Japanese one – it means experiment. Kokoro means art, spirit or mind, so it was perfect.

**What's your aim for Kokoromi?**

**HK:** To make more stuff, I think that was the number one thing.

**PF:** We were going to write this manifesto, but we kind of forgot. But we wanted to make and promote experimental and artsier videogames that you couldn't do in a commercial setting.

**How have your fellow developers reacted to these principles?**

**HK:** There are some that just aren't into the idea of this kind of stuff.

**PF:** You know – you do your eight, ten or even more hours of work on a game and when you go home you don't necessarily want to start over on another game.

**HK:** Or they actually want to spend some time playing, because the more you're making

## OUT THERE



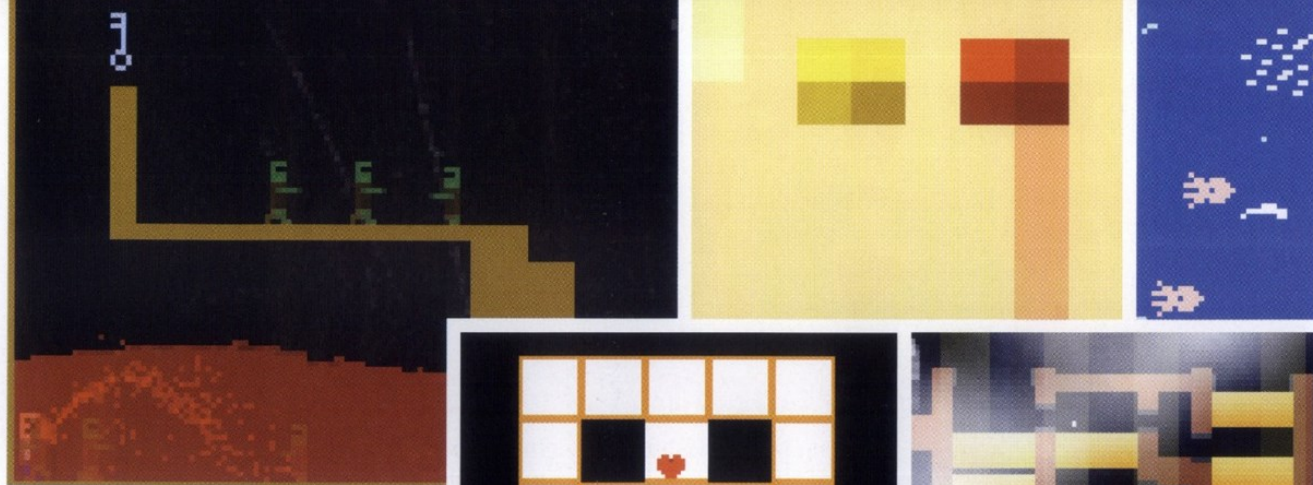
## FINGER MOUSE

Johnny Lee, a particularly frugal and inventive graduate PhD student at the Human-Computer Interaction Institute at Carnegie Mellon University, has been putting the Wii Remote to a number of unusual uses. Lee has repurposed the Remote's ability to track infrared light, creating a touch-controlled display by sticking reflective tape to the ends of his fingers. Another thrifty idea is his low-cost digital whiteboard, which uses the Remote to track an infrared LED inserted into the end of a pen – turning an ordinary LCD screen into a tablet PC. Poverty-stricken digital artists everywhere rejoice.

• [www.procrastineering.com](http://www.procrastineering.com)







videogames, the less you're playing. But there are people it definitely resonates with, and it seems like since we've been doing it it's been increasing. People are interested in doing and playing something different.

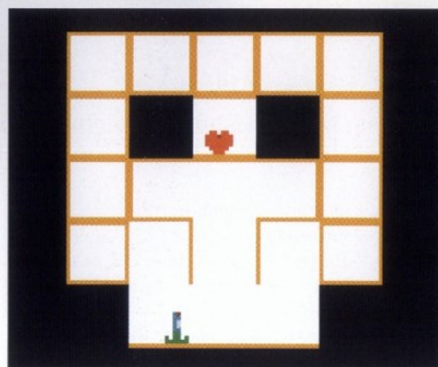
**PF:** I think there's a lot of frustration in the games industry. They're working away on the latest movie-based game and they don't get to be creative. Everyone has ideas, but they don't have a chance to work on them. A lot of people saw the first Gamma [last year] and said: 'Damn, you got to make all this?' It's a lot of hard work, but if you want to make something different outside of your day job, you can, but it's a big commitment.

**HK:** Makers own what they make, but they're responsible for their own agreements with their employers. Apart from finding the time, often they're not sure legally where they stand with making their own games.

**PF:** There's a pretty standard clause in videogame development employment contracts that says that everything you think of is your employer's. Everything you dream of related to videogames.

**How much does that worry you?**

**PF:** It's pretty scary. They rarely use it – I've asked



Games featured at the Gamma 256 show included (top row, left to right) *Bloody Zombies*, *Dodge Club*, *Dive*, (centre row, left to right) *Mr Heart Loves You Very Much*, *StdBits*, *Doomed Planet* and (right) *Passage*. Each can be downloaded from [www.kokoromi.org](http://www.kokoromi.org)

my employer to take it out of my contract. They say that they've never used it and that it's in case people start their own company and take technology, but it's there.

**Are you concerned that so few of the people who produce games with you are from the commercial side?**

**HK:** I would say that they're part of the industry – they're not in the big studio, triple-A sector, but they're in the indie industry.

**PF:** It's just now becoming an industry. Two, three years ago it was just a scene.

**HK:** But some people are earning a living now.

**What's been the big catalyst for change?**

**PF:** It's XBLA and PSN and downloadable distribution, and a lot of that is made by a few guys in a basement. It's a lot cheaper for the likes of Jonathan Mak to make a game than a small team in a big studio. So for publishers it's good, and for us it's good. I think it's just starting.

**Why the 256-pixel rule for the Gamma show?**

**PF:** The original idea was a 16x16 limitation, which we felt was too limiting, so we settled for 256.

It's a few more pixels than the NES's resolution, and there's a lot of room to move there with aspect ratios.

**HK:** And 256 is such an important number...

**PF:** *Passage* seems to have struck a nerve.

**HK:** That's the poster child.

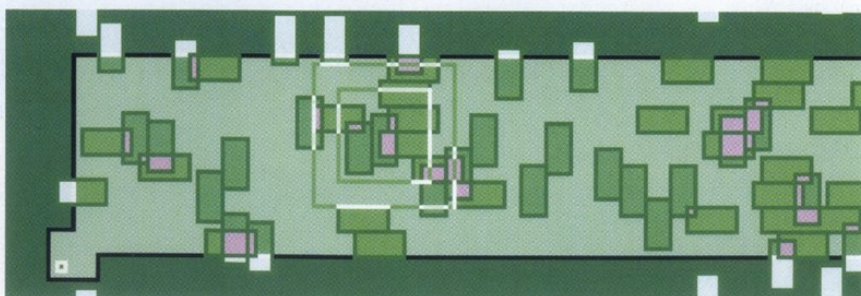
**PF:** Pretty much all the articles highlight it as the artsiest game there. It's great. Maybe a noisy venue wasn't the best place for a game about death, but it turned out well.

**You say that these games are artsy, but by and large they're games first. Should games celebrate being games or should they try to cross into other cultural areas?**

**HK:** I like that they're riding that line because it needs to be pushed sometimes, like using non-traditional mechanics and asking how things that are game-like can be integrated into wider digital media expression.

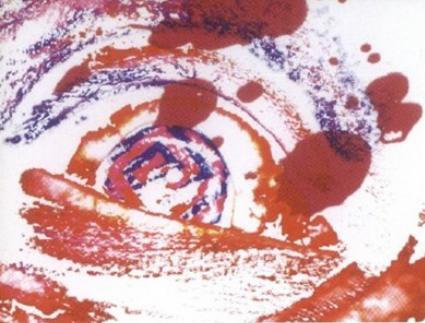
**PF:** But if you're going to do something for Gamma, make a game – put rules, put systems into it. We're a game collective. Interactive art isn't enough.

**HK:** There are enough opportunities out there for interactive art already.



Phil Fish's current personal project is *Fez* (left), a 2D/3D puzzle platformer that has been nominated for both the Design Innovation and Excellence in Visual Art awards at the forthcoming IGF. *Mondrian Provoked* by Jim McGinley (above) was another game at Gamma 256





## Caught in the act

How the law covers videogames

The dispute between the BBFC and VAC rests on interpretation of the Video Recordings Act 1984, the act that empowered the BBFC to classify (or otherwise) video recordings and games for use in the home. Although revised in 1994, there is concern that the act is ill-equipped to cope with the rate of change in the media world. "The Video Recordings Act, insofar as it deals with games, only deals with games on physical media," says Cordall. "So downloads aren't covered at all; the BBFC has no jurisdiction. Technically [Rockstar] could just offer a download, but then you run up against things like platform owners who want you to have things classified anyway."



# The Manhunt 2 review

The BBFC's ban on Manhunt 2 faces a judicial review in what could be a landmark case for censorship in the UK

**D**ecember was an eventful month in the drawn-out saga of whether Rockstar's controversial *Manhunt 2* would see release in the UK. On the 10th, the Video Appeals Committee ruled in favour of the appeal by Rockstar against the British Board of Film Classification's decision to reject the game (both in its original form, and the cut version recently released in the US). The VAC demanded the BBFC classify the game, and thus clear it for release. A week later, a stung BBFC applied for judicial review

turning upon questions of unacceptable levels of violence."

It was a step further than the BBFC had been prepared to go a decade earlier, in 1997, when the VAC overturned its ban of *Carmageddon* – the first and only other game to be refused classification – in similar circumstances. According to digital media lawyer **Gillian Cordall** (above) this indicates that the BBFC is deeply concerned by the implications of the case. "They're not messing about," she said. "Appeals have happened before, but to actually go to the expense and the bother of a judicial review implies that it's something very serious for the BBFC, that they think it will hamstring them in some sense."

**"Appeals have happened before, but to actually go to the expense and the bother of a judicial review implies that it's something very serious for the BBFC"**

of the VAC decision, and just before Christmas it was told that the appeal would be granted, with the case expected to be heard in January.

"The BBFC is contesting the VAC judgement because in the board's view, it is based on an approach to harm which is an incorrect interpretation of the Video Recordings Act," said the ratings body in a strongly worded statement. "The VAC judgement, if allowed to stand, would have fundamental implications with regard to all the board's decisions, including those

Until the judicial hearing brings the details of the case into the public realm, it is difficult to be sure of the precise nature of the dispute between the VAC and the BBFC – and indeed of the precise nature of the BBFC's objection to *Manhunt 2* in the first instance. Both Rockstar and the ratings body declined to comment beyond their press releases, and the text of the VAC ruling is unavailable.

We do know that the VAC received representations arguing that the level of violence in *Manhunt 2* was not particularly extreme: **Fred Hasson**, CEO of UK developer association TIGA, said he was "surprised at how tame it is," while psychologist **Guy Cumberbatch** described it as



It was only in April 2007 that the BBFC finished a study into why people play games in order to revise how it should examine them. It concluded that the common idea that interactivity makes players more involved wasn't necessarily true







"fairly sanitised" compared to film. This is certainly likely to be true of the revised version, with its specific cuts to graphical detail in some killings.

This has led to accusations that the BBFC is bowing to political and media pressure on this particular game, given the controversy surrounding it, the first *Manhunt*, Rockstar, and violent games in general. It does seem an inconsistent decision for a body known for a balanced and progressive outlook, and which has itself pointed to the lack of evidence that interactivity makes violent imagery more harmful. "When it comes to harm, the arguments on both sides really are not very compelling as to whether games are more harmful because they're interactive," said BBFC examiner **Jim Cliff**, speaking at Nottingham's GameCity festival in October. "We don't think they are because there's nothing that's been shown to us to say that they are, so essentially we apply the same guidelines."

However, at the same event, Cliff pointed out that intensity of imagery is not the only thing the BBFC takes into consideration. "We keep in mind tone and context, and we keep them in mind quite strongly," he said. "Context is probably the word that's used most in the building. We really look at what kind of game it is, what you're being asked to do, and what you're allowed to do." This seems to be the sticking point for the censor when it comes to *Manhunt 2*. BBFC press releases have cited its "unrelenting bleakness and callousness of tone," "exceptionally little alleviation or distancing," "sustained and cumulative casual sadism" and the "sheer lack of alternative pleasures on offer".

But it's over how this context might be harmful to the game's players that the BBFC and VAC seem to differ. Responding to the VAC's decision, the BBFC said that its approach "goes beyond purely



behavioural harm, and... also takes account of other possible effects on the sensibilities and attitudes of individuals."

Cordall believes that the VAC has taken a far broader, societal view of harm: "I would have thought it's in that area – the issue of who is the likely recipient of the harm, and why that's the case. If you're saying that it's pointing at harm caused to society by the actions of individuals, then the BBFC would feel that it could almost not cut or reject classification for anything on that basis, because there aren't the studies to back that up."

Cordall's feeling is that a judicial decision in favour of the BBFC would not change the landscape significantly, or necessarily lead to stricter classification of games. "They're a pretty sensible and progressive body... it's not like they do this very often," she notes. However, she thinks the BBFC will be seriously undermined if the decision goes against it, perhaps so far as to affect its decisions on film and video as well. With the censor currently the subject of a parliamentary bill by MP Julian Brazier, proposing a degree of governmental oversight of BBFC appointments and decisions, the judicial hearing comes at a sensitive time for censorship in the UK.



*Manhunt 2* has also faced a rough ride in the US, originally receiving an AO rating, which would heavily restrict distribution. Rockstar subsequently made cuts to the game to get an M rating.







HOLLYWOOD

## SOUND BYTES

"One that we're even extremely flattered by is *Super Mario Galaxy*, with their spherical worlds; we did spherical worlds in *Going Commando*, and *Up Your Arsenal*. It would be amazing to think that Miyamoto-san thought that was so cool that he wanted to incorporate it into *Mario Galaxy*."

Insomniac marketing director **Ryan Schneider** ponders the origins of a certain game of 2007

"It's not an idea we got from anywhere else. I'm sorry but I have to admit that I've never seen the game in question. Is it a PC game?"  
And **Shigeru Miyamoto** bursts the bubble

"The unsated demand is costing Nintendo more than face. Estimates from industry analysts and retailers indicate that the company is giving up \$1 billion or more in sales in the ever-important holiday retail season, not including sales of games for those unbuilt consoles."

Oh, the pressures of popularity, a terrible problem to have according to the **New York Times**

"I look forward to working with MTV Games to create new original game stories, always looking for ways to innovate the medium."

Says *Bad Boys II*'s **Jerry Bruckheimer**

"I'm surprised by it, because I would never venture to suggest what software publishers should price their software at. So I don't think it's appropriate for them to suggest what hardware should be priced at."

SCEA CEO **Jack Tretton** doesn't take advice from the likes of Activision Blizzard's **Robert Kotick**, all right?

# Alien syndrome

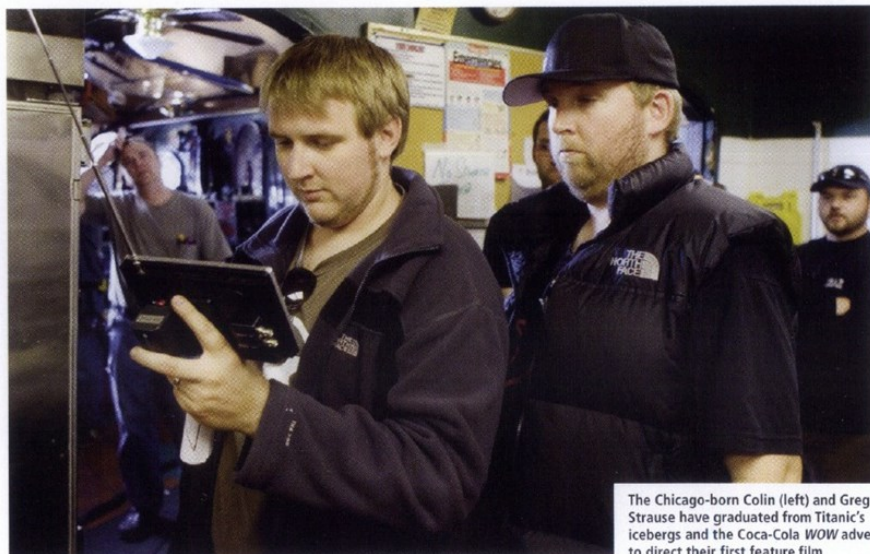
Time to break out the pulse rifles and wrist-blades. And this time, say moviemakers The Brothers Strause, gaming's in the firing line

If they've told you once, they've told you a million times: in space, no one can hear you scream. What they don't tell you, unfortunately, is that no one's been heard screaming in the company of *Aliens* and *Predators* for almost ten years. After Rebellion's terrific (and terrifying) *Aliens Vs Predator* in 1999, these two movie icons joined hands and leapt deep into a creative morass.

But hope springs eternal, as it must after Paul Anderson's maligned, catastrophically amusing movie *AVP: Aliens Vs Predator: Requiem*, released in cinemas this month, is an adult-rated, energetic sequel which, while nothing to trouble Messrs

Scott or Cameron, has sparked talk of a franchise revival. Last month's tie-in game for PSP was no masterpiece, but Gearbox and Obsidian are hard at work on two *Aliens* blockbusters, a shooter and RPG, commissioned by Sega and 20th Century Fox. And that, say Requiem directors The Brothers Strause, isn't all.

"I believe they're working on a next-generation *AVP* game right now," says **Colin Strause**, who, together with brother **Greg** and their company *Hydralux*, has made the not-uncommon jump from special effects wizardry to full-blown moviemaking. "They talked to us about it a little bit and asked us to be involved with it earlier, but



The Chicago-born **Colin** (left) and **Greg** Strause have graduated from *Titanic*'s icebergs and the Coca-Cola *WOW* advert to direct their first feature film





Rooted in fanboyism since its debut as a 1992 comic book, AVP floundered once its novelty wore off. Requiem has garnered the occasional good review

we were so busy with the movie we didn't have time. Now we're interested and do have the time. I believe the new AVP game will be coming out in the next two years."

Boasting a complete collection of modern consoles together with a powerhouse PC, Colin is the self-professed gamer of the pair. Not even the intense nine-month shooting schedule of Requiem could stop the occasional late-night session, the shooter being his preferred genre: "I played *Gears Of War* co-op with one of the guys here in the office until three in the morning as often as possible while we were working on AVP-R. We should have been sleeping, but

**"Now that games are in HD and they have surround sound, and you play on a big-screen TV, the experience is very theatrical"**

*Gears* is so much fun. Co-op is really where games need to be.

"*Call Of Duty 4* was one of the most fun experiences I've ever had in a game," he continues. "It's basically like playing *Black Hawk Down*. Now that games are in HD and they have surround sound, and you play on a big-screen TV, the experience is very theatrical. Sometimes I'd rather play games than watch movies because the experience lasts so much longer."

It was last spring, in a meeting with publisher Vivendi, when the brothers learned of its new AVP games and were asked to lend a hand. Rebellion, developer of the PSP game and potentially its console cousins, showed them its imposing next-generation Asura platform, and in return saw much of what Requiem has in store: creature designs

including a new 'Predalien' hybrid, new Predator visor modes, and clips from the movie itself. And this, we learn, wasn't the first case of one informing the other.

"AVP was an awesome game franchise," explains Colin. "What I remember most about those games was the balance. The Predators had the great vision, but the cool thing was that if they were looking at humans they couldn't see Aliens and vice versa. There are certain scenes in our movie where the Predator is looking at a human and he has to keep jumping back to different vision modes to track the Aliens. We drew a little from the comics as well, but our biggest influence was from the [early] Alien movies and the original Predator."

"From a tonal standpoint, [new movie Requiem] is a reboot," says Greg. "It's a much darker, scarier movie. The tone of the last film wasn't as horrific as it needed to be. Our mission statement was that we wanted to make *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* but with Aliens and Predators running around killing people instead of cannibals. It was very much a small-town horror film."

Despite the union of these twin towers of sci-fi horror, AVP isn't the most auspicious starting point for a filmmaking career. Game-based movies and tie-in games are seldom spectacular, another of this year's attempts, *Hitman*, inspiring Variety to

bemoan 'the pic's dark roots in an electronic, non-dramatic medium'. The Daily Telegraph, meanwhile, settled for: 'Rubbish, of course'.

"It's tricky," agrees Greg. "There haven't been that many good videogame-to-movie translations. But you can't say we're turning a videogame into a movie; you have to say we're making a good movie. The problem occurs when people get too hung up on the videogame aspect. If you try to make *Half-Life* into a movie it'd be like *The Lord Of The Rings*. It's a great story but it's so convoluted that you can't do that in two hours. You have to make sure the characters and the plot have the depth that people expect. If you try taking too many videogame rules and put them in, I think we've seen that doesn't work that well."

Nevertheless, no one's ruling out the brothers' own interactive adventures. Having gone from making special effects for the first *X-Files* movie to award-winning TV commercials and music videos, they see games as just another challenge with its own peculiar set of rules. "I know they're tricky because the story can span 20 or 40 hours," says Colin. "It's a whole different kind of medium. But there's something cool about being in the middle of a game. *Half-Life* is a good example, because even though it's heavily scripted you can play that thing for weeks on end. I think it'd be really cool to get involved."







INTERVIEW

## Hereditary rights

We speak to Ken Matsumoto, producer of *Dynasty Warriors 6*, about why the critics won't stop complaining about the series that keeps selling

**D**ynasty Warriors has never enjoyed the status in the west that it has in Japan, where it was once the highest-selling series in gaming, with each iteration being rapturously received. We spoke to the producer of *Dynasty Warriors 6*, **Ken Matsumoto** (above), about working on a franchise that pleases its fans, but is routinely dismissed by western critics.

**DW6 is the first DW game for the current generation of systems – how are you taking advantage of the extra power?**

The graphical capabilities are obviously much improved. We've redesigned the characters with new animations. That in itself helps you improve what I'd call the 'atmosphere' of the game through something like having no fog on the battlefield – you can see as far as you need to. Let's put it this way: this is a battlefield game, and if you, for example, want to survey this big space you can climb a ladder or get to a promontory and look. It makes the game vertical as well as horizontal.

**What are the problems with making a *Dynasty Warriors* game? Do you feel a tension between staying the same and innovating?**

*Dynasty Warriors* is the biggest franchise we have at Koei. The storyline is set, so we can't change that to any great degree. We have to innovate, but you can't lose sight of why people enjoy the games in the first place. The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms is a story of great nuance, and I feel that an Asian audience sees what we do differently, and what's new in terms of story, straight away – whereas people who don't know this story or the characters completely miss that level of the game. The difficulty is in being caught between an audience who love it, and another group of people who don't. So we get these two contrasting types of feedback and it's hard bringing them together – you can't please everyone.

**Are there specific criticisms that annoy you?**

Sometimes I feel annoyed. Comparing us to *Halo*, which I've seen on one occasion, is stupid – they're

just different. Games are often criticised on what they're not rather than what they are. People got annoyed with *Wii Sports* because it didn't have league tables, or allowed you to have a three-wood in golf, or something, and it's a brilliant game that's simply not interested in offering those things. With *Dynasty Warriors* we might feel the negative criticism isn't fair, but when there have been a few sequels it's hard to turn those opinions around. You'll sometimes read something that doesn't mention any of the new things in the game, then says it hasn't done anything new, and you wonder: was it even played for more than 20 minutes? Perhaps people think, 'Oh, that can fill up half a page', and just give it to someone who doesn't know the subtleties of this particular game – and when you get into an iterative series, subtlety is where the value lies.

**So what is important to you in terms of producing a game?**

Ah, that's difficult to express... I think videogames should be fun, but everyone's idea of fun will be different from everyone else's type of fun. Really, people always forget that their favourite game is different from my favourite game. *Wii Sports* brought a new type of fun to the market, I hadn't seen that before, and I like *Wii Sports* – that's innovation. That's the most important thing: even now, videogames are not getting to all users, and perhaps fun is the most profound thing we can think about.



At one point, *Dynasty Warriors* was the biggest-selling game franchise in Japan, and thanks to the high sales each iteration is re-released in an unfortunately named *Xtreme Legend* form



Capcom's US website hosts a series of regularly updated blogs and developer diaries, and while the site obviously exists to promote the publisher first and foremost, looking beyond that shows a treasure trove of information on its finest titles – and the site has an easy navigation bar that breaks posts down into specific game sections. To quote a recent *Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles* post: 'Did you know Wesker was 38 years old, 138 cm (I think that's approximately 23 feet), 84.5 kg, with O-type blood? No? Then this is news you cannot miss!' As well as pointlessly interesting tidbits like that, there's David Sirlin's ongoing and highly informative commentary on *Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix*, an amusing *Ace Attorney* section, and piles of interviews and trailers for the likes of *Devil May Cry 4*. A model for other publishers.

Site:  
Capcom's official US site and blog  
URL:  
[blog.capcom.com/](http://blog.capcom.com/)





# The art of storytelling

Susan O'Connor has helped write some of the best-selling games in the past few years – and she's still telling stories...

**G**ame writer **Susan O'Connor** (right) has worked on games both praised (*BioShock*) and pilloried (*Gears Of War*) for their story. We caught up with her to get a personal view of her recent projects, including *BlackSite: Area 51*.

**So, how did you get started in game writing?**

I started off with a small studio that made kids' games.

**What did writing kids' games teach you?**

That most games are still written as if they're for children! There's no subtext. I think a lot of times dialogue in games, and I've been asked to do this myself, is to write incredibly obvious dialogue. In real life people never say what they want. Movies are better at doing dramatised exposition – using drama or conflict to mask that things are being explained. With games, though, the player wants to be involved in the conflict. Exposition in a game has to come during the play.

**Why do you think that writing for games has now become so important?**

I think that gamers are starting to pay a lot more attention to the quality of stories. Writing good



stories for games requires as much effort as the game design. If developers skimp and write stories with no intelligence, and I've worked on titles like that, the critics rip it apart. Critics are my best friend. If a client comes along and says "we'll just do whatever" I can point to the critical reaction to games with weak stories and show that gamers now expect something better.

**What's your take on how *Gears Of War* turned out?**

Working with the team was really great. But if you have a team like that, that hasn't really worked on a story-led game before, the burden is on the

writer to fight for the story. I was only one voice!

**There seemed to be a lot of implied plot in *Gears Of War*, but little was explained.**

I don't really know what happened to the story. I worked on the script, but I think a lot of that got cut long after I was off the project.

**How did the experience compare with working on *BioShock*?**


A very different experience. There was similarly a story in place when I came on board, but Ken



Discussing ideas for *BlackSite*, O'Connor said: "If America was looking for disposable people to use as super soldiers, they'd use Mexicans. I had an idea of a scene where they capture a family crossing the border and send the family back but keep the boy. It'd have been really interesting to see the beginnings of a boss character in that way"

Levine is a trained writer and had a whole structure in place. Also, they were willing to refine and change the story until the last minute. Game writing is quite messy, so many changes happen during production that you have to be prepared to go in there at the end and make it right. I think that's why a lot of game stories are beginning to work. Developers now bring the writer back for the alpha or beta phase. Before, I'd be done months before alpha, and the game could be completely different on release.

**Harvey Smith made headlines for his opinion of *BlackSite*. What did you think of it?**

I haven't had a chance to play the game yet, but Harvey Smith was fantastic to work with. It was an interesting situation. We had a very traditional IP to work with – aliens vs soldiers. I think a lot of the team, not just Harvey, had a hard time giving a crap. Harvey wanted to do something that was very subversive within the IP. If I had my way, there would not have been a single alien in that game. Due to budget and time constraints we couldn't quite create the fiction we wanted to, but I'd love to see more subversive, political content in games. People think of the audience for games as being young males. Even if that were true, young men don't only go and see Vin Diesel movies! 



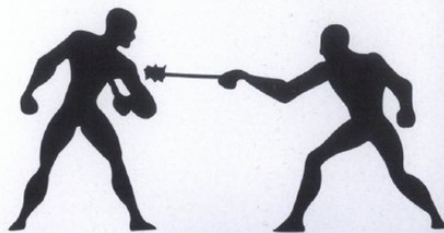
*BioShock's* plot went deeper than the large amount of shooting in the gameplay would suggest, but its writing was capable of surprising players, especially through the use of audio diaries



ONLINE

# Face to face gaming

The next stage for social networking sites is as attractive platforms for online games



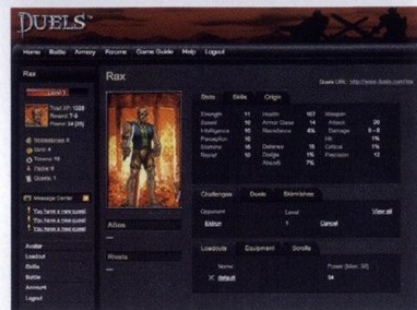
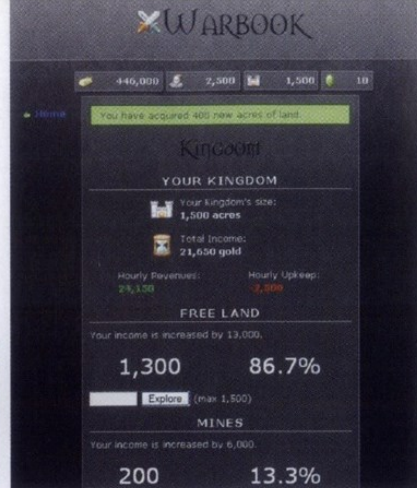
facebook

It's probably no new insight to suggest that the success of gaming portals like Newgrounds, Kongregate and their ilk has been largely predicated on their ability to retain gamers by building a community. More recently, however, it seems that this play works equally well the other way around: non-specialist community and networking sites like Facebook are showing increasing interest in the potential of multiplayer games to ensure returning users and a strengthening of community ties.

While the likes of Facebook's multiplayer Scrabble application *Scrablous* have been around for some time, there has been a surge in larger

scale games which promise to further blight office productivity. Naturally, games which offer a persistent player profile and interaction with others build on the existing attraction of networking sites, so it's no surprise that MMOGs, like the statistically heavy fantasy kingdom builder *Warbook* and PvP marathon *Duels*, have both proven popular among Facebook users.

Although many of these games feel a little underdeveloped compared to those on more established Flash gaming sites, Facebook's broad userbase ensures they have potential to reach a much wider audience than had they been relegated to niche hobbyist gaming portals.



*Duels*, a cross between *World of Warcraft* and *Magic: The Gathering*, is the brainchild of Andrew Busey, CEO of the Austin-based Oxygen Games and co-founder of 'social media' firm Pluck

## Continue

Generation gaming  
How many DSEs are there in your family now? Scary

Uwe Boll-derdash  
"Tomorrow, we will gouge evil from its shell!" indeed

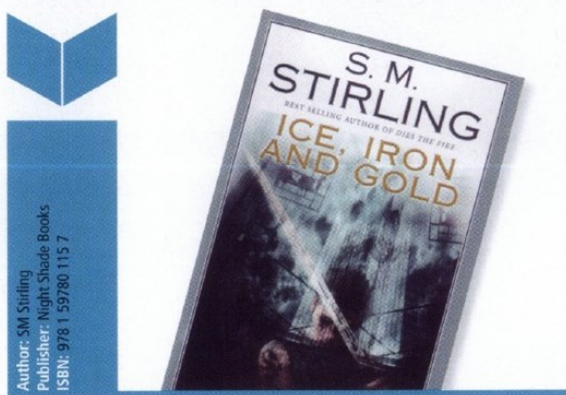
Books about games  
We'd forgotten just how good TUHOVG really is

## Quit

Trailer trash  
The Duke Nukem voiceover guy's still alive! Amazingly

Tin helmets  
The war games in this issue will do for a while, thanks

TV shows about games  
Actually, do the opposite of quit and make some more

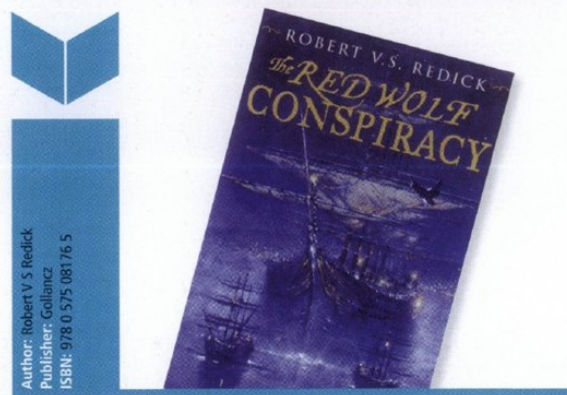


### ICE, IRON AND GOLD

A selection of Stirling's short sci-fi stories mixes arch historical revisionism with a hard military edge

There's always been something of a fascistic undertone in the universe of hard sci-fi writing. The politics seems to leak from the machines into the social fabric of the imagined worlds, especially those dominated by militarism. In that context, SM Stirling makes for an interesting figure. Works such as the *Nantucket* series, and most especially the *Draka* series, mix alternative histories with violent conflicts and a focus on military strategy, technologies and the camaraderie of the fighting man (and woman). But, as the latter statement underlines, Stirling also takes a broader view on the structure of those societies, especially in terms of sexuality. Perhaps you could best describe him as a west coast libertarian riding Heinlein's coat-tails.

*Ice, Iron and Gold*, the first collection of Stirling's short stories, makes for an easy introduction. Mainly covering examples previously published in sci-fi journals, there are selections from his *Dies The Fire* work, set in a world in which electricity, petrol engines and gunpowder have stopped working, as well as from the *Nantucket* series, which reverses the process, with a time-traveller taking 21st century tech to the Bronze Age. Other examples include playing around with the classics, notably L Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, a seminal alternate history sci-fi story. So something for most tastes, then, always assuming you enjoy the cut and thrust of the battlefield, combined with occasional historical trickery.



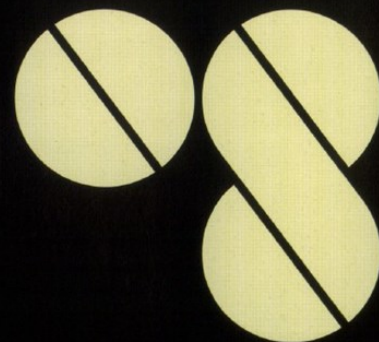
### THE RED WOLF CONSPIRACY

Gollancz's next-big-thing fantasy author debuts with an impressive flourish

It seems every year Gollancz discovers another new writing talent. So following on from Scott Lynch (*Gentleman Bastard* series) and Joe Abercrombie (*The First Law* series) comes American Robert V S Redick with *The Red Wolf Conspiracy*, the first in a trilogy. Firmly set in the contemporary fantasy heartland, it neatly dissects Lynch and Abercrombie's work by combining both a strong protagonist narrative – tarboy Pazel Pathkendle is special but cursed – within the rich framework powered by the geopolitical intrigue of two warring empires, Mzithrin and Arqual. The fulcrum on which the action turns is the *IMS Chathrand*, a monstrous 1,000-year-old vessel which is the last in a line of mysterious ships. Put to sea with a bridal party that will bring peace to the world through marriage, it doesn't take long before betrayal, infighting and secret plans between the various onboard factions place the fate of the ship, its crew and peace itself into stormy waters.

Of course, being the first third of an adventure, in places *The Red Wolf Conspiracy* reads a little bit like a primer as Redick offloads information rather than story. But thankfully such impatience is restricted to the latter stages, which are also tremendously action-packed, leaving plenty of opportunity to enjoy the introduction of Pazel, unwilling bride Thasha and the mysterious eight-inch-high *Ixchel*, among other imaginatively conjured folk. The fantasy revival continues apace.





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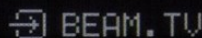
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# INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

## Borderlands

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES



Joining *Aliens* on Gearbox's release schedule, *Borderlands* hopes to break new ground with a 'near-endless' variety of weapons, enemies, character upgrades and randomly generated missions

## Grand Theft Auto IV

FORMAT: 360, PS3 PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES



Just as was to be expected, Rockstar's latest trailer shows little in the way of new mechanics, but plenty more of the game's cast, and no small amount of the style that has made the *GTA* name

## Don King Presents: Prizefighter

FORMAT: 360, DS, Wii PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES



Sneaking in a few punches while *Fight Night's* back is turned, Venom Games presents a spiritual sequel to its popular *Rocky* games, promising 'a revolutionary documentary-style narrative'

## Ninja Reflex

FORMAT: DS, Wii PUBLISHER: EA



EA throws the party, you throw the shurikens. *Brain Training* meets *Wii Sports* is the pitch, players taught the way of the wand by a personal Sensei. Nunchuck Games (of course) develops

## Insecticide

FORMAT: DS, PC PUBLISHER: GAMECOCK



A slip to February for the detective story that scuttles between combat shooter and story-based adventure, the PC still in line for downloadable episodes. You'd like to think bugs were the culprit

## Just Cause 2

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2 PUBLISHER: EIDOS



Rico Rodriguez has a new mission on the South Pacific island of Panau, ruled over by bad-egg dictator Baby Panay, dominated by three warring factions and where his former CO has gone rogue

## Patapon

FORMAT: PSP PUBLISHER: SCE



The 'unique' tag seems tenuous given the superficial likeness to *LocoRoco*, but this is no rebrand. Music plays an even bigger part in this iconic platformer, your attacks empowered by the beats

## The World Ends With You

FORMAT: DS PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX



Square Enix's trendy Tokyo RPG sashays to the west in the spring following a successful run in Japan. Fashion, friends and fighting are the must-haves, the team behind *Kingdom Hearts* designing

## Prototype

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 PUBLISHER: SIERRA



Radical's homage to just about everything pushes the point with its new trailer, the novelty being in the mix. Parkour versus a helicopter, for example, or *Crackdown* with a narrative intrigue

## INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

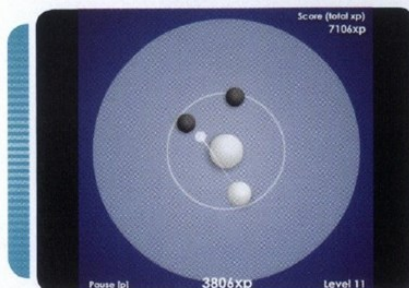
Zwingo

[www.kabomb.net/games/zwingo.html](http://www.kabomb.net/games/zwingo.html)

Kable Monck's latest game is an odd little something: the love-child of Sumo wrestling and Swing Ball. In the centre of the stage, a circular arena is marked and a large white ball placed within. Black balls spiral in from the edges of the stage, as though it were slightly concave in shape, and you must bash them away before they knock the central ball out of its enclosure.

You have no bat, however – your means of defence against the incoming missiles is another white ball attached to

your cursor by elastic, forcing a somewhat anarchic means of control. In addition, the speed with which you bounce black balls away from the centre and out of the arena contributes to experience points which you can use to upgrade the stage or your equipment at the end of each round – increasing the size or speed of your 'weapon', the mass of the target ball or the diameter of the arena. Add boss battles to this and you have a peculiar muddle of game elements, somehow coaxed into a compelling unity.





## CREATE

In *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft used Autodesk® 3ds Max® software to create a hero character so real you can almost feel the coarseness of his tunic.



## ANIMATE

Autodesk® MotionBuilder™ software enabled the assassin to fluidly jump from rooftops to cobblestone streets with ease.



## INTEGRATE

Using Autodesk® HumanIK® middleware, Ubisoft grounded the assassin in his 12<sup>th</sup> century boots and his run-time environment.



**HOW UBISOFT GAVE  
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Image courtesy of Ubisoft

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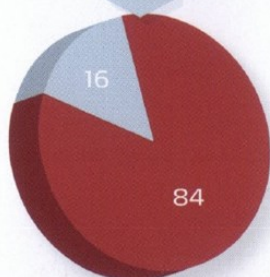


# Industry

## FOCUS

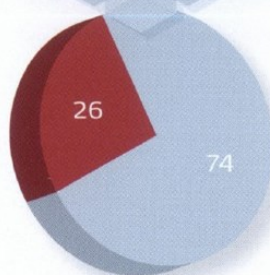
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Commercially available MMOGs' IP trends (%)



ESTABLISHED IP ■  
NEW GAME IP □

IP background revenue split between top 20 subscription titles (%)



ESTABLISHED IP □  
NEW GAME IP ■

## The march to consoles

Analyst Piers Harding-Rolls highlights the growing importance of consoles for future western MMOGs

In last month's column we looked at some content trends for games on the latest generation of consoles. This time we take a look at some key trends for western MMOGs, and what these trends tell us about the nature of that particular online market in the US and Europe.

Obviously, the big story in the premium subscription sector over the last three years has been the massive commercial success of *World Of Warcraft* and how that one title has helped turn around a rather stagnant sector as well as boosted the transformation of the European market from a niche to a substantial commercial opportunity in its own right. It has also been well documented that *WOW*'s success is not primarily a result of great content innovation, but more the delivery of a highly polished game experience. The title's licence, its gameplay and fantasy setting do nothing to break away from the traditional MMOG experience of level grind, dungeons and dragons. So much for content innovation.

But while *WOW* has been a great success with familiar content, most current MMOGs are in fact based on game IP that is fresh and new to the gaming arena. Out of the 124 commercially released western titles we have tracked, 84 per cent are based on new game IP, underlining the fact that MMOG developers and publishers continue to strive to innovate.

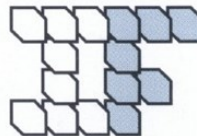
Last month we examined the same metric for Q4 2007 releases on consoles, which showed that only 37 per cent of releases were based on new game IP. This shows a startling difference to the MMOG sector, but one which can be at least partially explained by the long development times of many premium MMOGs, the length of time they operate (resulting in fewer sequels) and the fact that not all types of game IP translate well to the MMOG model.

Perhaps a more notable statistic is that for the top 20 western subscription titles in 2006, revenue from established game brands accounted for 74 per cent of total revenue, whereas those with new game IP only



NCSOft had big hopes for the MMOG *City Of Heroes* in the Korean market, but the game flopped in the territory, illustrating how taste varies by region





In the face of *WOW*'s dominance, *Eve Online* (right), based on new IP, has still managed to flourish. Meanwhile, not many Asia-origin MMOGs have performed well in the west – *FFXI* (below right) being a particular exception



accounted for 26 per cent. The results are skewed somewhat by *WOW*'s market share, but even so it is clear that these established brands go a long way toward mitigating some of the very high commercial risk found in MMOG development.

**As a result** we expect to witness a decline in the proportion of new game IP in MMOGs over the next five years and increased licensing to support those that do use new game IP, much as we have seen in the console space. Unlicensed new game IP in the MMOG sector is likely to become significantly scarcer, especially at the premium end of the market.

Aside from game IP, there are changes going on in other aspects of the western MMOG market. One notable transition is the development of more console or multi-platform MMOGs. There are at present very few MMOGs available on consoles – two per cent of commercial releases in the west – but ten per cent of MMOGs currently in

development. This is in marked contrast to the console market, where most Asian content released in the west comes from Japan. As the market as a whole shifts toward developing more online content, the balance of industry power within Asia

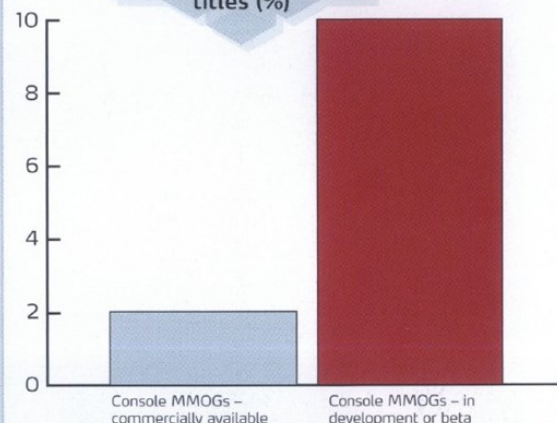
is being more widely disseminated across different countries and not just Japan. Although there are few MMOGs operating in Asia that were developed outside of South Korea and China, the western market is completely different – 46 per cent of available titles were developed in the US, 24 per cent in Europe, and 'only' 30 per cent in Asia. Regional share of revenue from the top 20 western subscription titles in 2006 makes it clear that content developed locally in tune with western tastes is more likely to be commercially successful within the premium subscription market. North American developed content was responsible for 82 per cent of subscription revenue in 2006, while Asian content was only responsible for eight per cent.

**In the next three years we expect the console to become a major platform for premium MMOGs, which will give publishers a wider market to aim for**

development will support consoles. This is largely driven, rather obviously, by the growing use of consoles as online platforms and also the improved technical capabilities of new console hardware, such as the inclusion of hard drives so that incremental content can be downloaded direct to the console. In the next three years we expect the console to become a major platform for premium MMOGs, which will give publishers a wider market to aim for.

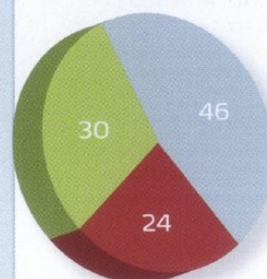
The shift to support consoles will have its own impact on MMOG content. While the PC is able to support a very complex interface, consoles have fewer inputs, which will inevitably result in a simplified form of interaction. This may not please traditional MMOG players, but simplified controls are likely to broaden the audience for MMOGs.

Console MMOGs' share of all western titles (%)



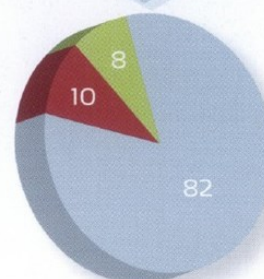
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Geographical origin: commercially available titles (%)



NORTH AMERICA   
EUROPE   
ASIA 

Geographical origin: top 20 western subscription MMOGs, by 2006 revenue (%)



NORTH AMERICA   
EUROPE   
ASIA 





## PlayStation 3 and Wii: one year on

Famitsu's Koji Izawa takes stock at the start of a new year



**I**n December, the Japanese games industry had its busiest time of the year: and this year was very busy indeed. On the release schedule we had titles like *Dragon Quest IV* and the second of the *Professor Leyton* series on the DS, the curiosity and potential smash hit *Wii Fit*, *Winning Eleven 2008* which was primarily

promoted as a PS3 title, the PS3 exclusive *GT5 Prologue* and, on a more local note, *SD Gundam G Generation Spirit* for the PS2.

Christmas also meant that it's been just over one year for the Wii and PlayStation 3 in Japan. Released within a month of each other (November 11 for the PS3, December 2 for the Wii), the Wii came close to selling out at launch, with 371,936 units out of 400,000 sold, while the PS3 sold 81,500 in its first day. The PS3's growth since then has been measured, and the installed base in Japan lies around the 1.5m mark. In comparison, there were a million Wiis sold within a month of launch, two million four months after launch, and three

million after seven months. At the time of writing, the Wii has just passed the four million mark – the icing on a truly astonishing year for Nintendo. This has been marked with some clever moves by the Kyoto company, with a new TV guide channel coming in the spring, the coup of *Monster Hunter 3*, and the announcement of a 2008 release for *Dobutso No Mori (Animal Crossing)*, and the Wii

see that the sleeker white look has had an impact, because that's what half of the customers are buying – next to Nintendo's machines in particular, the black PS3 looks a little dull. And the good news doesn't stop there for Sony: the PSP is doing really well, with a million units of the new slimmer version being sold in Japan and many of those customers picking up the digital TV tuner as well.

**The DS still dominates the market, but the vast majority of profitable games come from Nintendo. The revival in the PSP market is heartening for some developers, who now see it as viable to switch titles over to Sony's portable**

looks like it will maintain its success. But this November saw the PS3 outsell the Wii for the first time, 183,217 units to 159,193, which is an encouraging sign – but is it the harbinger of a sustained challenge, and a revitalised Sony?

The PS3 is definitely gaining in strength. It's certainly been a struggle for Sony to convince the public, but it is now making ground up: mainly because of the much cheaper new model allied to the release of some popular titles. I'm also glad to

The new Deep Red version is catching this wave of interest and will have picked up a lot of sales over the Christmas period.

It's not just the hardware that's important: with more PSP titles hitting the magical 100,000 copies sold mark, more PSP development is underway in Japan and will only strengthen its position further. Its consumer base is now large enough to sustain hit franchises: in February, for example, Capcom will release *Monster Hunter Portable 2G*, which is





*Gran Turismo 5 Prologue* has just received its first batch of downloadable content, though some gamers are a little wary of paying for a demo of something they'll buy later anyway

sure to be a smash – an enhanced version of the game that, arguably, kickstarted this revival for the platform and sold 1.5m copies. Of course, the DS still dominates the market to an outrageous degree, but the vast majority of profitable games come from Nintendo itself. The revival in the PSP market is thus heartening for some developers, who now see it as viable to switch some titles initially marked for DS over to Sony's portable.

I expect that Nintendo will keep breaking records, pulling in the cash, and doubtless surprise us all a little more with its innovative strategising in 2008. But 2008 is also going to be the key for SCE and the PS3, and in preparation for this challenge they've restructured internally: Shawn Layden has recently been announced as SCE's new president. Although he's English, this man from Sony's World Wide Studio has a great deal of experience with Japan, and understands the Japanese market well. I've met him several times before, and believe he certainly has the capabilities to bring the PlayStation back to the forefront of our gaming thoughts, and his approach will be interesting to watch.

Do I sound like I have a vested interest? I do – I love great videogames. And I want to see a stronger PlayStation, because that will tempt developers into producing some fantastic games that really use the machine's power. Let's hope, as gamers, that the Englishman abroad can be a success

Wii *Animal Crossing* will be released this year in Japan – but localisation will inevitably mean a longer wait for western gamers



### Weekly Famitsu (Enterbrain) Japanese sales: December 10-16

#### Software (week's sales, and total sales to date):

1. Mario Party DS (Nintendo, DS): 160,115 (762,580)
2. Wii Fit (Nintendo, Wii): 119,841 (527,069)
3. GT5 Prologue (SCE, PS3): 108,040
4. Dragon Quest IV (Square Enix, DS): 78,288 (854,424)
5. Layton 2 (Level-5, DS): 73,496 (482,165)
6. Super Mario Galaxy (Nintendo, Wii): 70,541 (571,136)
7. Wii Sports (Nintendo, Wii): 68,497 (2,262,044)
8. Hajimete no Wii (Nintendo, Wii): 66,942 (1,814,179)
9. Mario & Sonic Beijing Olympics (Nintendo, Wii): 58,044 (206,765)
10. Chocobo No Fushigina Dungeon (Square Enix, Wii): 43,756

#### Hardware (week's sales):

1. DS: 248,670
2. Wii: 168,229
3. PSP: 157,863
4. PlayStation 3: 53,084
5. PlayStation 2: 20,710
6. Xbox 360: 8,722
7. Game Boy Micro: 622
8. Game Boy Advance SP: 389





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# Hype

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## Edge's most wanted

### Resident Evil 5



*The Club* reminds us of *RE4*'s Mercenaries mode, stirring our need for new *Resi*. Will Mercenaries return? Zombies? Capcom certainly knows how to exploit anticipation. 360, PS3, CAPCOM

### Alan Wake



Dark days seem fitting for a bit of psychological nightmare adventure, though we won't see it until later in the year. We'll have to settle for wondering what it all means. 360, PC, MICROSOFT

### Mother 3



With the English fan-translation having progressed ten whole minutes into the Japanese-only game, the monumental size of the project has finally become clear. GBA, NINTENDO

## Conflicting stories

Fun or real: what do war games want to be?



*Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway*'s predilection for graphic violence is made all the more difficult to understand when you consider that the series has previously given WWII the most sensitive treatment of any videogame out there

We cover a lot of war games this issue, and they all deal with the business of carnage in different ways. But as their developers master Xbox 360 and PS3's capabilities to produce more convincing worlds, the tension between their nature as games and their attitude toward realism is becoming stronger.

*Rainbow Six Vegas 2* continues its series' fetishism of military technology and tactics, and its promise that through efficiency its soldiers could always survive the densest hails of bullets. But for all the detail in its loving renderings of modern weaponry, and the calls of its fans for the inclusion of favoured rifles, it must be a huge challenge for Ubisoft Montreal to meaningfully differentiate between and balance the use of one submachine gun and another while still making a fulfilling game.

Meanwhile, in *Frontlines*, the heritage of its developer (a *Battlefield* 1942 mod-maker) and its need to tell a story are at odds. Its portentous cutscenes expound a politically sensitive tale about a war over oil, complete with embedded reporter, yet the game itself is actually abstract, an FPS centred on the game mechanics

of classes and weapon balance rather than realism.

A similar unease is palpable in *Conflict: Denied Ops* which, despite its roots in Pivotal's squad shooters set during Desert Storm, has stepped into *Gears Of War*'s cartoon grittiness, with two surly sociopaths cutting their way through goons. And yet Pivotal has claimed that its inspirations are still taken from reality, with a story about a rogue nation threatening to unleash nuclear weapons.

And then we have *Brothers In Arms*, which is perhaps the best illustration of this discord. It's terrifically hard to reconcile its loving, slow-motion dismembered Germans with its veneration of war veterans, with a History Channel show devoted to explaining how the game has recreated actual WWII battles. Gearbox's Randy Pitchford argues he's trying to avoid presenting a sterilised vision of war, but game technology can't yet hope to match the impact made by films like *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*.

It leaves us wondering what these games really want to be. Is it entertainment or testament? And are these ever anything other than conflicting?

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**Star Wars: The Force Unleashed**  
360, DS, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii

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**Rainbow Six Vegas 2**  
360, PC, PS3

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**Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway**  
360, PC, PS3



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**Conflict: Denied Ops**  
360, PC, PS3



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**Frontlines: Fuel Of War**  
360, PC, PS3

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**Dynasty Warriors 6**  
PS3



41

**Gran Turismo 5 Prologue**  
PS3

41

**Sins Of A Solar Empire**  
PC



42

**FlatOut Head On**  
PSP



42

**Phantasy Star Portable**  
PSP



FORMAT: 360, DS, PS2, PS3, PSP, Wii  
 PUBLISHER: LUCASARTS  
 DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (360, PS3),  
 KROME (PS2, PSP, Wii), N-SPACE, INC (DS)  
 ORIGIN: US  
 RELEASE: SPRING 2008



Expect to see some very familiar sights throughout. Although taking on an AT-ST walker in most previous games would have been suicidal, here you'll just casually fry its circuits and toss it aside

## Star Wars: The Force Unleashed

The game of the series that's not based on the films but set between them

**T**he Force Unleashed casts you as Darth Vader's secret apprentice, tasked with carrying out his dirty work all over the universe and scouring the last remaining Jedi from their boltholes, all the while keeping your existence secret from the Emperor. That means no survivors, and since the game is set in the gap between Episodes III and IV while the Jedi scramble to escape the Empire, there are plenty of insufferable do-gooders to terminate.

The title indicates the main aim of the game: to play as a Force user at the full height of their planet-crushing powers, able to throw things around with a thought, crash starships with a flick of the finger and casually slice things up with a red lightsaber for the sake of an evil laugh.

The interest in the licence is the sheer amount of money that LucasArts can afford to throw at the technologies that construct the gameworld: Pixelux Entertainment's Digital Molecular Matter imbues any object

in the game with the real-world properties of that object, so glass will shatter, metal will warp, and plants will bend according to the specific force and direction of your actions rather than responding to stimuli with a fixed animation. Examples of this are the steel shutters that block progress through a TIE fighter factory – these can be wrenched open with a Force blast, but importantly each one slowly peels open and eventually gives way in a different manner to its predecessor, dependent on the apprentice's distance and angle from it.

Of even more potential, however, is NaturalMotion's Euphoria engine (see Codeshop, £165), a slice of sophisticated behavioural middleware that simulates decision-making in your enemies. Holding an enemy in the air with a Force grab may make him clutch at a nearby railing or one of his comrades – in which case his friend will attempt to pull him down; if you lift both higher a third may get involved, or the



Dance for me, won't you? The greatest aspect of the game is that LucasArts looks to have really nailed the sensation of controlling a Jedi against cannon fodder, something not managed since the Jedi Knight series



**When Digital Molecular Matter and NaturalMotion's Euphoria combine they can bring about the sort of incidental detail never previously seen in videogames**

second one may decide to cut his losses and let go before you lift them both too high. When the two technologies combine (and the Havoc physics engine is in there, too) they can bring about the sort of incidental detail never previously seen in videogames: destroying a TIE Fighter at one stage (by throwing a metal beam through the glass cockpit) sees it spin off into a nearby wall, with one of its solar panels falling on two enemies underneath, who

react accordingly to their chests being trapped rather than simply going through a single death animation.

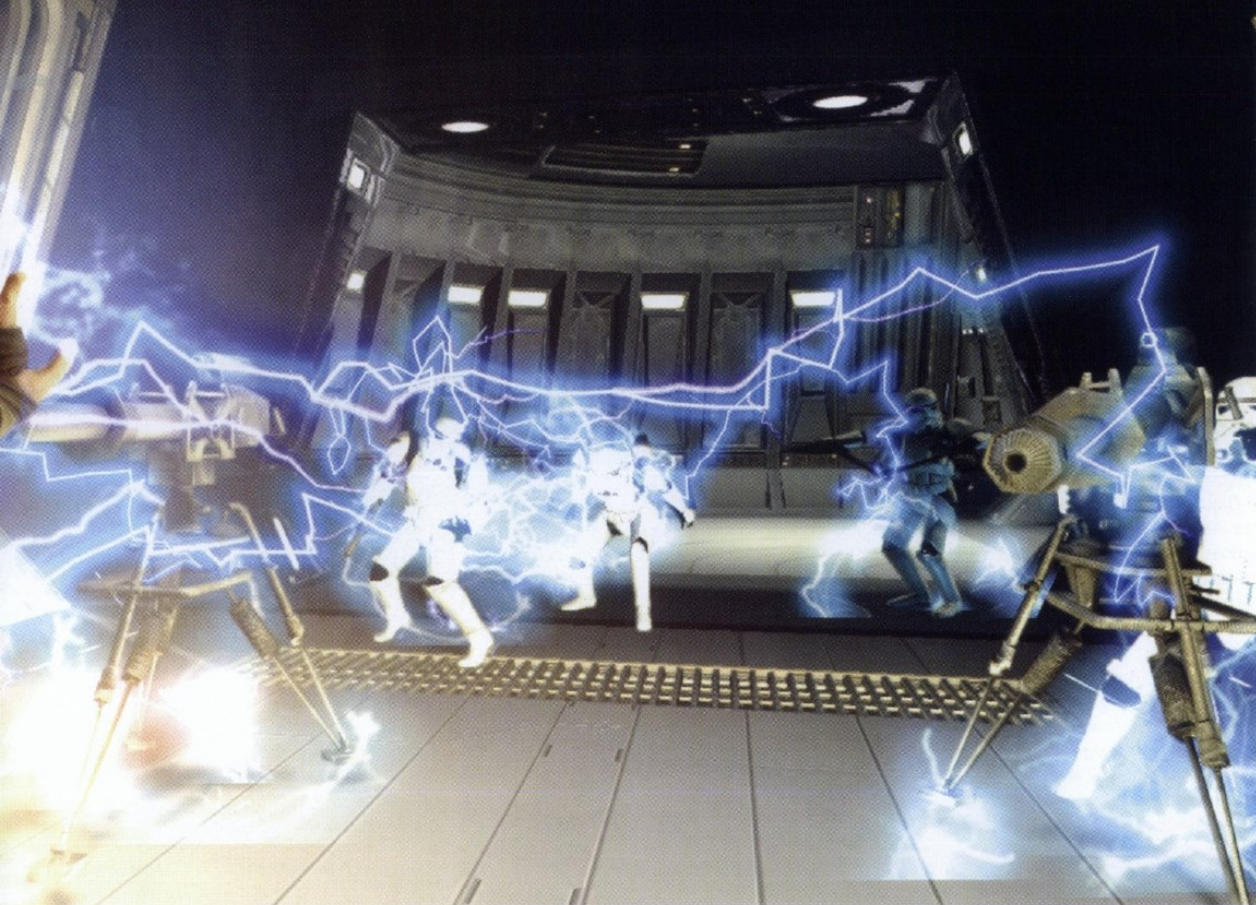
Visually, the game has a strong and faithful adherence to the Star Wars universe that lends many of its environments a familiarity – and allows the use of some clichéd settings without them necessarily being noticed as such. That's no great problem, and the presence of TIE fighters and Stormtroopers delights the inner child as much as ever, and there's some welcome fleshing out of races and planets that have never been anything other than hinted at, as well as familiar locales such as the Wookiee homeworld of Kashyyyk. (The former group includes Raxus Prime, a dumping ground for waste that became so large it eventually gained its own gravity and became a planet, and the plant world Felucia where the inhabitants have their own limited connection to the Force.)

Combat might seem a straightforward thrash through much weaker enemies, but it's made more challenging by each group of enemies having their own response to the threat of an incoming Jedi: the Empire's Stormtroopers, for example, are well-drilled and good marksmen, and will only panic when they're actually being whirled through



The Wii version obviously lacks the detail of the 360 and PS3 versions, but has exclusive stages and concentrates on the greater sense of connection the controls offer to set up huge force opportunities against groups of foes





**Honestly, this time we really mean it...**

What *The Force Unleashed* will largely stand or fall on is the upgradeability of the basic Force powers – in the demonstration given by LucasArts, the powers wielded by the apprentice were extensive, but hardly akin to the publicity shot of him bringing down a star destroyer. There's a basic RPG skilltree lurking under the game's action surface, and each power will increase in destructive magnitude – eventually allowing you to send squadrons of enemies flying, or through walls instead of against them. But just how big it will get is unclear, and after constant promises that we've never seen Jedi at their full power (the exact promise made about the fight scenes in the second and third films), is this just another false dawn of slightly fancier lightning effects?

the air towards a chasm, while Felucians have shamen that use their basic Force abilities to heal groups and disorientate your approach. None of them are capable of your power, however, which consists of four basic abilities: Force push, Force grip, repulse and lightning. That may seem meagre, but the key to them is that they can all be combined with one another. You can simply Force grip someone, hold them in the air and casually toss your lightsaber into their stomach before calling it back. Or you could push them towards a wall from that starting position 50 feet in the air. Or lift them, electrocute them and throw them down like an electrical bomb into a group of their fellow warriors. The possibilities aren't limitless, but they're extensive enough to make experimentation a necessity and fighting the inevitable large groups of enemies again and again more bearable.

*The Force Unleashed* is shaping up well, and we shouldn't forget that Star Wars has provided a comprehensive backdrop to several great games. The only worries concern the relatively meagre variety of enemies seen thus far throughout the levels, and the risk that only four powers may come to seem too few if the combinations aren't as extensive and distinct as promised. But that's picking holes in a game that has been heavily invested in, and looks like it could deliver the promise in its title. It certainly deserves any preview resisting the temptation to finish with a Star Wars quote.



This is the kind of thing that Star Wars games have always brought to the imagination, and it's hard to imagine it getting tired. That's not a bad way to wield a lightsaber, either



# Rainbow Six Vegas 2

Team Rainbow revisits Sin City on a mission of refinement over revision

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3  
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT  
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL  
ORIGIN: CANADA  
RELEASE: MARCH



It seems a strange way of concluding a story that ended on a cliffhanger:

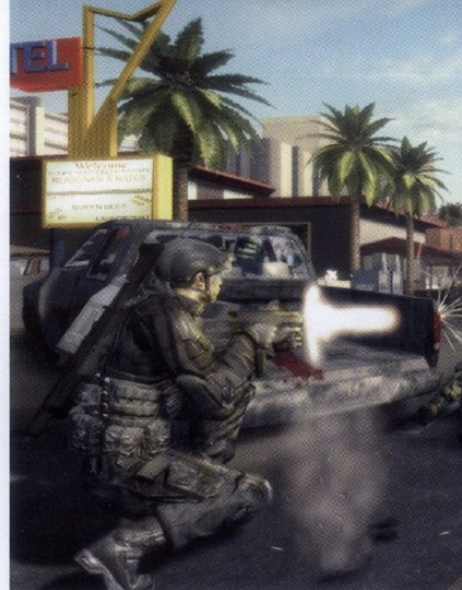
Vegas 2 is at the same time a prequel, a finale and synchronous to the first Vegas. But it's trying it anyway, substituting Vegas's player character, Logan Keller, for a customisable avatar called Bishop. Ubisoft Montreal's team claims the game is a chance to implement 'cool ideas' that didn't get into the original and to 'close the story with a bang', but much as this wishlist implies added drama, Vegas 2 will actually be set less among the neon gaming halls of the city than its seamy backstreets and industrial units. Oh, and also, following Vegas's brief visit to Mexico at its outset, a couple of so-far-undisclosed locations outside of the US.

As a sequel, Vegas 2's innovations find expression in refinements rather than reinvention. The AI of teammates and enemies has been tweaked, making them react more richly to events and feel more naturalistic. Now, an enemy will shuffle away

from the edges of cover if it receives damage, rather than sitting happily until it dies. Certain elite units will be equipped with the same thermal and night-vision visors as the player, making items like smoke grenades ineffective and forcing new tactics to be used against them. Additionally, enemies will curse a lot less, instead vocalising lines that inform players about what they're up to.

On the allied front, teammates now leapfrog between pieces of cover instead of charging straight forward, each unit covering the other with fire as they advance, one after the other. Some new commands have been added, too – throwing grenades and suppressing fields of view to allow flanking manoeuvres. Squadmates will also impart information indicating how well players are doing, advising on tactics and weapon loadouts. This decision is the result of player complaints that there was too little feedback in the previous game.

Indeed, apart from AI improvements,



Elite units will be equipped with the same thermal and night-vision visors as the player, making items like smoke grenades ineffective and forcing new tactics to be used



Vegas 2 includes 11 new weapons, including a silent sniper rifle, and the team claims that the entire arsenal has been better balanced so that every gun has a specific strength

Vegas 2 has been afforded a pervasive reward system for every action players make, whether in single or multiplayer. The XP system found in Vegas has been overhauled to give more feedback on gains made, with an indicator unobtrusively set in the bottom right of the HUD, and this is also extended to the singleplayer mode. Any recognised combat tactics will be rewarded, with the amount dependent on the difficulty setting. Increases in rank unlock new sets of armour,

which feature different levels of protection and mobility for multiplayer, though they can be worn in singleplayer too, due to PEC (one of Vegas 2's many acronyms, it stands for 'persistent elite creation').

A second reward system is called ACES. Using various tactics unlocks weapons according to the type of action: assault recognises multiple kills, causing splash damage and defeating cover; marksman covers long range kills and headshots; close quarters covers accuracy, use of flash and smoke grenades and short-range kills. The aim is to reward players with weapons that suit the style of play they favour.

It's all very worthy stuff, and designed to encourage players to fit with the developers' vision of careful play based around a cycle of observing new areas, planning attacks and executing them. It must be said, however, that the team's need to reward players for playing 'correctly' with mechanics outside that of actual play seems to be suggesting that Vegas's basic design fails to fulfil Ubisoft Montreal's intentions for how players should approach the game.

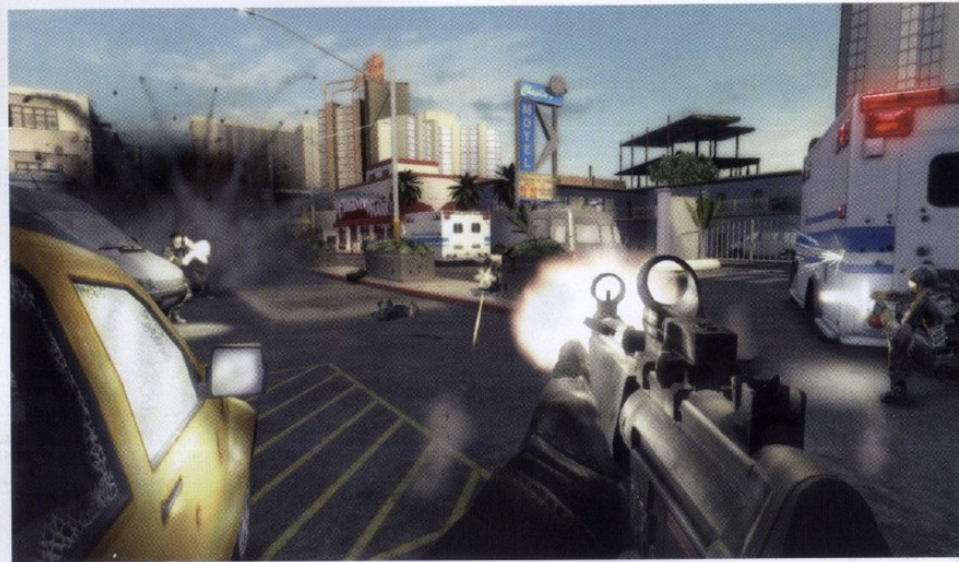
Vegas 2's campaign mode has been designed primarily for twoplayer play, and it features the requisite drop-in-drop-out co-op, the second player taking on a







To a large extent, the tweaks and additions seen in *Vegas 2* are the results of the development team plumbing the depths of internet forums to see what players thought of the original



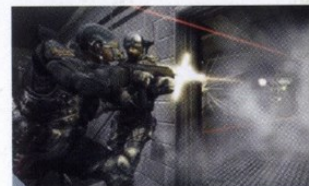
character called Knight. Levels are designed with multiple routes and points of entry to offer a range of options for action at every stage, to make sure that the two players rarely have to wait for each other to act and to encourage collaborative plans. The environments are now a little more interactive, too, as befits *Vegas 2*'s move up to Unreal Engine 3. They feature more breakable objects and grades of cover – some materials will disintegrate under fire, while others, such as plywood, will offer no protection at all.

It's easy to imagine people who weren't swayed by *Vegas*' solid charms seeing its sequel as the game that *Vegas* should have been. Plagued with problems getting its engine to work properly, the team admit that they had less time to invest in *Vegas*' design than they would have liked. But there are nonetheless many prudently realised ideas in *Vegas 2* that will ensure that, at the very least, it will be as solidly enjoyable as its predecessor.



One of the many criticisms of *Vegas* was that checkpoints were far too spaced out, so *Vegas 2* happily includes almost *Halo*-like numbers of them

The ordering system now includes 'tagging' – directing the squad to take down specific enemies. Co-op players cannot order the squad, but can tag and revive allies



#### Meh-th match

*Vegas* wasn't exactly endowed with imaginative new multiplayer modes, and *Vegas 2* looks set to continue the trend. It has two new undisclosed modes and 13 new maps, including remixes of classic *Rainbow Six* arenas. Matchmaking has been overhauled to take players' Trueskill rating, their language settings and XP score into account, and players will be able to join in-progress matches instead of having to observe until the round finishes. Terrorist Hunt has been tweaked to stop enemies respawning in 'cleared' areas, and is now fourplayer. Those hoping for some imagination along the lines of *Splinter Cell*'s spies-vs-mercs multiplayer might well be disappointed.



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3  
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT  
DEVELOPER: GEARBOX  
ORIGIN: US  
RELEASE: 2008

## Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway

Gearbox digs up Market Garden for its next reverential hymn to the heroes of WWII, but is its graphic approach to history a bridge too far?

**T**here's a moment in our playtest of *Hell's Highway* when we throw a particularly well-placed grenade at a German machine-gun emplacement. It detonates and blows one of the Wehrmacht soldiers clean in half, sending his legs and torso flying through the air in opposite directions. The game's 'action camera' kicks in, crash-zooming in on the carnage, focusing on the cartwheeling, dismembered, bloody stumps for a few seconds of pornographic slow-motion.

Weird. But is it appropriate? The lascivious treatment of extreme violence seems starkly at odds with the overall tone of the game. *Brothers In Arms* is the most considered and tactical of World War II action series, and also the most humane and sentimental. In place of the Boy's Own heroism of *Medal Of Honor* or the faceless, epic bombast of *Call Of Duty*, it gets up close and personal in the style of its namesake TV series, with persistent characters, cutscenes heavy on military pathos, and moderately

**"These weapons are like watching the best fireworks display in the universe, but it's also horrible, it tears people apart, it's gross and amazing at the same time"**

A welcome side-effect of the continuing enthusiasm for WWII games is the meticulous recreation of parts of the world that otherwise wouldn't be considered glamorous or spectacular enough. *Hell's Highway's* virtual tourism offers a real unexpected pleasure: the subtle charms of the Dutch countryside

"Oh, you got that?" says Gearbox's boyish, talkative president and CEO **Randy Pitchford** when we mention the incident to him later. His eyes sparkle with the naked enthusiasm for gore typical of so many American videogame developers. "We have a very clever engineer who developed software that actually does that, it's an algorithm," he explains eagerly. "We didn't build the content in advance to know where it's going to happen. Those guys can tear apart in lots of different ways. And it's both gross and funny at the same time – isn't that weird?"

realistic, cautious, squad-command play. *Hell's Highway* – the third proper instalment, and the first on the current generation of hardware – is no different, following the now-familiar Sergeant Matt Baker and his squad into Holland as part of Operation Market Garden in September 1944.

Isn't this serious and solemn treatment – which will be reinforced by both a novel and a history book by Gearbox's military advisor – cheapened by revelling in procedurally generated, slow-mo mutilation? Pitchford argues that it absolutely isn't; it's honouring the experience of veterans, who he feels

experienced just the same uncomfortable mix of horror and gratification. "Talking to veterans, there's something about that – these weapons are like watching the best fireworks display in the universe, but it's also horrible, it tears people apart, it's gross and amazing at the same time. Most people don't get to see what soldiers get to see – or are burdened to have to see."

Hence the unapologetically showbiz action camera – inspired, Pitchford says, by *Burnout's* crash-cutting: "What we would do as developers is pause the game, fly the camera over there, run it in slow-motion and



*Hell's Highway* runs on Unreal Engine 3, but Pitchford promises "15 to 20 per cent higher fidelity than *Gears Of War*" and, unlike *Call Of Duty 4* and *Halo 3*, true 720p rendering. But its understated rural realism can look a little plain beside its competitors' staged pyrotechnics, and you can often see the joins





The game is a little shaky, with both AI and framerate offering some less-than-convincing moments. Pitchford admits to 3,000 known issues, but is proud to show the game as is, rather than a carefully polished demo



Pitchford mentions the James Cameron film *Titanic* as a reference point in his approach to historical fiction. *Brothers In Arms* doesn't quite have the same spectacle, but like that movie it's obsessively researched, and hangs on a broad, simple, emotive storyline

watch the event happen. I'm like, 'We've got to come up with a way where we give that to the customer'. That's what the action camera is. No one's done that in an FPS, ever. No one has wanted to take that risk. But it's so rewarding, we can't not do it."

The action camera isn't the only example of *Hell's Highway* playing fast and loose with the firstperson perspective, in line with the current genre trend. A new *Ghost Recon*-style cover system pops the camera out to thirdperson, giving a clearer view for tactical commands as well as a little more cinematic style. Another visual signature is the game's representation of risk, as an alternative to health. *Hell's Highway* takes an even harder line to being hit by bullets than the brutal *Call Of Duty 4*: one hit, or maybe two, will kill. So, when out of cover and in the firing line, as the risk of being hit increases, the screen darkens, reddens and distorts. It's a familiar-looking effect, but an interesting application that really promotes tension as well as a clear awareness of fields of fire. It meshes well with the game's precise style of suppression and flanking, effectively mirroring the circular suppression meters that appear over enemy positions.



Why make *Brothers In Arms* firstperson? "In the context of immersion, to fulfil the promise of putting you in the boots of a paratrooper, firstperson is the closest thing the games industry has to virtual reality," Pitchford says



The game's extremely simple tactical command system still works well – point and pull the left trigger, and the AI will pretty much take care of the rest. *Hell's Highway* increases tactical flexibility by allowing you to command several separate squads, including specialised heavy-weapons teams – the machine-gunners used in the early level we played being particularly effective at suppressive fire. You'll need all the elbow room they can provide in coping with the extremely open battlefields of the Market Garden campaign; the dark and enclosed flash-forward training level should not be taken as indicative. Maybe it's just the contrast, coming so soon after being swept along in *Call Of Duty 4*'s 'sturm und drang', but the tactical combat seems quite stern and specialised, less responsive to brute force than, say, *Ghost Recon*.

But with *Infinity Ward* – whose creatives Pitchford admires because, as he states simply, "they make great shooters" –

swinging its dazzling spotlight to modern times, there's that little bit more room in this crowded corner of history for *Brothers In Arms* to make a splash. And it will probably find, in those virtual re-enactors sticking with the era, an appreciative audience. Pitchford certainly doesn't think WWII gaming is close to being, or will ever be, played out: "There are certain fantasies that are key fantasies. Most of the folks who've done a good job making games like this have been fortunate to make a lot more than they spent. Even *Medal Of Honor Airborne*, and that game was... all right, you know what I mean?"

Appropriately enough, considering his stated mantra for *Brothers In Arms* is 'make it personal', Pitchford adds a somewhat geeky, very personal assessment of why World War II is such a universal theme. "It's hard to imagine a war that has more impact, especially to us, today. If we lost that war, we wouldn't have Windows." Food for thought indeed.



He ain't heavy

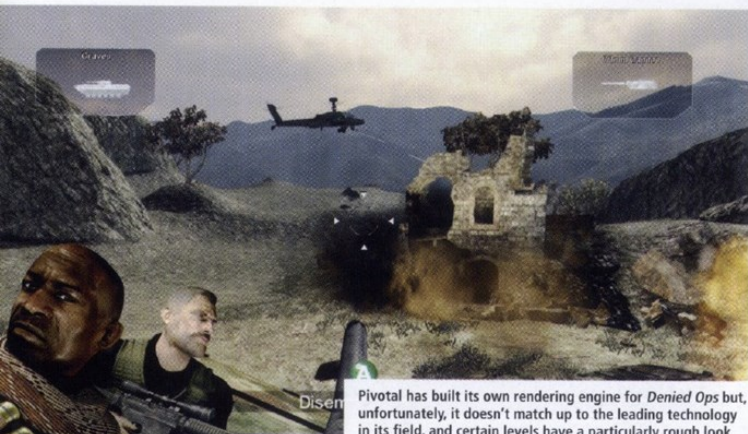
Gearbox faces a problem familiar to developers of squad-combat titles with story components – even more so considering the emphasis on fraternal responsibility reflected in its title. How do you make keeping your comrades alive matter, when their importance to the storyline dictates that they can't be killed? "It's an interesting problem, right?" says Pitchford. "We want there to be consequences to the player's decisions, but we don't want to have to deal with the plot ramifications of losing characters that are important. So in each combat, if an ally gets hit, he goes down and he's wounded, but if you survive the combat they can patch each other up and be ready for the next mission." It's the most practical fix, and yet it can't help but dissipate the tension.



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3  
PUBLISHER: EIDOS  
DEVELOPER: PIVOTAL GAMES  
ORIGIN: UK  
RELEASE: 2008

## Conflict: Denied Ops

Pivotal ditches the squad tactics in favour of explosive action with its own army of two



Pivotal has built its own rendering engine for *Denied Ops* but, unfortunately, it doesn't match up to the leading technology in its field, and certain levels have a particularly rough look



Chatback

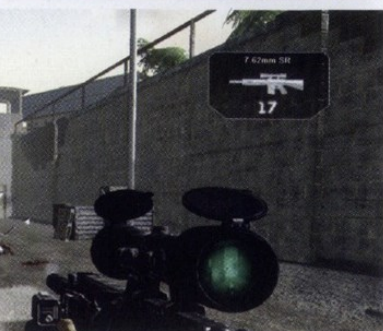
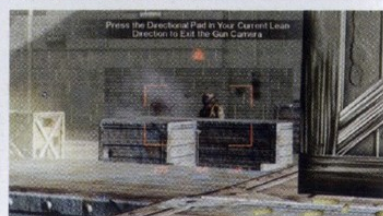
What with *Kane & Lynch* and *Army Of Two*, it seems like unpalatable duos are in vogue. Graves and Lang are not an especially appealing couple and their constant bickering, which seems to exist in lieu of any actual characterisation, seems to have no real narrative purpose. It is, however, very effective at getting on the player's nerves. When Graves snidely chides Lang for getting himself shot, it's only the player who is on the receiving end – and you don't get a right of reply. While there's no need to be constantly patted on the head, when you die as a result of your AI teammate's idiocy it is a bit galling to have him tell you off. Antiheroes are all well and good, but Graves and Lang's unnecessary animosity inevitably rubs the player up the wrong way.

As the *Conflict* series has brought itself into the present, it seems to have lost interest in keeping step with real-world events. Previous instalments' depiction of the first Gulf war and Vietnam, though not strictly realistic, were grounded in actual events and leant credibility by the coherence of their setting. *Conflict: Global Terror* abandoned this, sending the four-man squad globetrotting on the pretext of defeating an evil organisation with as much relevance to contemporary events as SPECTRE. *Denied Ops* goes further down this route, ditching the four-man squad tactics and thirdperson perspective that gave previous games the moniker of 'realistic tactical shooter'.

This time around you have the option to switch between firstperson control of either Graves or Lang, a pair of surly wise-cracking killing machines whose odd-couple banter begins to grate before the first shot is fired. Though the squad has halved in number, responsibilities are still divided between teammates – initially, Graves' sniper rifle is your only effective long-range weapon, while gunner Lang's light machine gun is essential in close-quarters action. Though at first the



The shooting is broken up with basic A-to-B driving sections which struggle to justify their existence other than as a tick on a checklist of must-have FPS features



The animation for healing your teammate can prove annoying – especially when he's got himself killed in open ground, under fire from a tank only he can destroy

duo's limitations are frustrating, with the completion of every mission there are new additions to the team's kit which change this balance. Graves quickly gets a gun-camera, which allows him to shoot around corners, and a shotgun attachment to his rifle, making him a little less feeble in confined spaces, and Lang's mounted grenade launcher and bazooka give you a few more options when the enemy keep their distance.

The excessive arsenal toted by the two-man team marks the series' move away from strategy and towards action – you can certainly soak up more damage than in previous *Conflict* games, and there's no limit to the number of times you can resuscitate a downed teammate. Nor is there any limit to your ammunition. In keeping with this move towards more immediate, accessible action, Pivotal has tried to keep squad commands as simple as possible: directing your companion to follow you, interact with an objective, move to a position or take down a particular enemy is all done from a single button. Though streamlining control is worthwhile, at this stage of development there are still a few teething problems recognising your exact request. Besides which, squad commands can only be as good as the AI used to execute them, and there are occasions when the AI exasperates – failing

to appreciate the need for cover when under fire from a tank, for example, or demonstrating a frustrating reluctance to enter a vehicle. On the whole, however, there seems little need to babysit your buddy, who is no less lethal when out of your control, and seems to have a decent survivability when acting autonomously.

As with *Global Terror*, Graves and Lang flit between a large number of exotic locations where, unsurprisingly, almost nobody is pleased to see them, and almost everybody then dies in a hail of gunfire, or because they stood too close to one of the very many exploding barrels that are being inexplicably stockpiled. It all contributes to a feeling of unease about the direction the *Conflict* series has taken – certainly in *Global Terror*, the new action focus seemed to have had the result of stripping interest instead of upping the adrenaline. *Denied Ops* will have to offer something else if the absence of the series' tactical core is not to make the game feel a little hollow.





The opening mission sees your helicopter shot down in a jerry-built encampment owned by an oil company. Aside from securing the crash site, you must rescue an embedded reporter captured by the bad guys



Though the singleplayer campaign restricts you to playing as the Western Coalition, in multiplayer, you get to choose your side. While generally equivalent, the weaponry and vehicles of the Red Star Alliance exchange manoeuvrability for increased toughness and firepower



FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3  
PUBLISHER: THQ  
DEVELOPER: KAOS STUDIOS  
ORIGIN: US  
RELEASE: 2008

## Frontlines: Fuel Of War

The team behind Battlefield 1942's Desert Combat mod drag players into the fray of World War III

You'd be forgiven if you thought you'd seen it before – an open war-torn environment, multiple objectives to capture and an assortment of vehicles to help you to get from one to the other. *Frontlines: Fuel Of War* certainly strays some distance on to *Battlefield*'s turf – which is no surprise given that Kaos Studios is largely comprised of people who worked on the hugely popular Desert Combat mod for *Battlefield 1942*. Promptly bought up by DICE to collaborate on *Battlefield 2*, and then just as promptly shut down, the team then founded Kaos Studios in order to create the *Battlefield* game that never was.

As such, *Frontlines* follows *Battlefield*'s formula closely, albeit with a number of interesting refinements. Most notable among the changes is the near-future setting, which

gives rise to an array of appealingly deadly toys based on projected technology: EMP devices, drones and rail guns. It's here that Kaos' experience with the genre becomes clear: considerable thought has gone into the balance of these items. In a departure from form, the six possible weaponry choices are entirely independent of the four player classes, creating a subtle interplay that allows for tactical individualism. Each class has three ranks, and at each rank a new utility is enabled. For the class specialising in electromagnetic warfare, this unlocks tools that can freeze vehicles, or deny air-strikes by disrupting target-painters, while the air-support class can call in cluster bombs and direct gunships. Then there are the drones – remote-controlled guns on wheels, and miniature aircraft that can be used to deliver telemetry or bomb enemies.

The range of equipment suggests considerable nuance, encouraging some thoughtful teamwork online. In singleplayer, meanwhile, the classes and weapon loadouts appear to be unlocked on a more per-purposed basis as the player battles through eight sprawling mission environments, each estimated to last an hour or more. While

each level encompasses a grand expanse – more than enough space to tinker with the game's various planes and cars – objectives aren't as dispersed as in many other open-world games. Instead, play tends to progress linearly from one end of the map to another, with new objectives unlocked as you push the frontline ever forward. Within this linear progression there is plenty of lateral freedom, but nonetheless it is a little disappointing that the frontline doesn't constantly fluctuate with general combat – instead being determined by the completion of objectives. Essentially, the frontline is little more than a progress bar, but it does serve to focus combat, creating a compromise between the open world and the cinematic action of more rigidly structured shooters.

Kaos' devotion to and understanding of the format shows. The game is already a polished and solid creation that builds on a proven structure while offering a sprinkling of innovation. There's little that is truly radical here, but the competency of *Frontlines*'s execution may be enough to capture some of the territory dominated by the *Battlefield* brand.



The singleplayer game follows the format of the multiplayer fairly closely, even down to giving the player infinite respawns. His AI opponents aren't so lucky: only a certain number of enemies appear on any level



### Oil and trouble

Set around the last remaining oil reserves in the Caspian Sea, *Frontlines* sees the world descend into war when the fragile treaty between the Western Coalition and Red Star Alliance crumbles. The singleplayer campaign has you play a series of nameless Western Coalition soldiers – once dead, you simply respawn from the nearest secured objective as though you were a reinforcement, effectively recreating the multiplayer experience. However, the missions are bookended by cinematics following a particular squad and an embedded reporter as the fighting spreads up through Russia. Not to say anything of the quality of these sections, it does seem a little unnecessary for *Frontlines* to superimpose a narrative over its obvious multiplayer inspirations.



FORMAT: PS3  
PUBLISHER: KOEI  
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE  
ORIGIN: JAPAN  
RELEASE: MARCH 7



The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms

*Dynasty Warriors* revolves around the classic Chinese novel *The Romance Of The Three Kingdoms*, and each iteration of the series is a reworking of the characters and battles from the book. The novel is one of the classics of eastern literature, and has been made into eastern and western TV series, manga and several videogames other than *Dynasty Warriors* (several of which were also made by Koei). The greatness of the book lies in the complexity of characterisation as well as the intricate plots and working out of side-stories, which makes it a relatively limitless source for the *Dynasty Warriors* series – and indeed, the likes of Cao Cao have featured in every game, with his actions in each title consistent with his character in the novel. Even the name *Dynasty Warriors* is a western convenience – the literal translation would be closer to ‘the true story of the three kingdoms’.



## Dynasty Warriors 6

For once, a game's title tells you all you need to know



Koei has the kind of problem most developers would love. The *Dynasty Warriors* series sells, sells and sells in Japan, devoured by adoring fans who demand more of the same. At the same time, the series is criticised for only implementing tweaks asked for by the community rather than the radical reimagining some think it needs. There isn't a halfway house, and *Dynasty Warriors 6* doesn't pretend otherwise: it knows it's a franchise iteration, but is beyond caring what the snipers think. And because of that, it's confident enough in its conservatism to make any changes additions to a formula that works, rather than readjustments that risk upsetting the apple cart.

Is that such a bad thing? Among the most distinct changes is a move away from linear battlefields towards more open environments which can be controlled by capturing particular strongholds and feature several avenues of approach to their main objectives. If your mission involves assaulting a castle, you can choose whether to simply break down its gate, use the moat to access its sewer system, or climb a mountain that

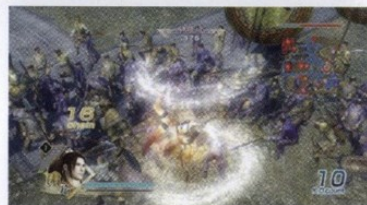


overhangs the fortifications and dive straight in. If you show a penchant for a particular method of attack, word will spread and enemies who know you're coming will prepare defences to catch you off-guard. Similarly, while you're fighting them you can demoralise the troops with stunning combos or by killing their leader: conversely, miss a few attacks and take a few in return, and word will spread that you don't live up to your reputation – and your enemies' efforts will redouble. Your characters can also level up, earning points to be spread around between levels to allow some control over their particular talents. In the light of how other games have innovated in the thirdperson fighting genre, these may seem slight, especially when spread over a lengthy game. The emphasis, however, is less on gaining new abilities, but on giving you more strategic options to approach the huge battles that are the lifeblood of the series.

The visuals and animations aren't up to the standards of this generation's finest, but they're significantly in advance of *Dynasty Warriors 5*. There is a particular improvement in the number of enemies onscreen and



Musou, from the game's Japanese name, *Shin Sangokumusou*, means 'unparalleled' or 'peerless', hence the designation being applied to your attacks that cleave the skulls of 50 enemies at the same time



The most obvious change from *Dynasty Warriors 5* is the number of foes you face at any one time, which seems at least double, and the amount of movement among them

their actions as they try to avoid your whirling weapons, which make them somewhat less lamb-like than in previous games. The lead characters have also been rethought, the incorporation of motion-captured animations for the first time in the series allowing a reimagining of their physiques and weapons – no big deal, perhaps, for western audiences, but an important element in the myths from which *Dynasty Warriors* draws.

The combos have also been changed significantly, with no artificial cap placed on the number of attacks you can string together – technically, it's possible to destroy every member of an army using one unbroken sequence. These sequences build up a new 'renbu' meter which allows more powerful attacks, and eventually leads to the musou attacks which decimate entire squadrons (of which there's an extra level beyond the previous games, probably allowing you to chop a castle in half or something). It's all adding up to an accomplished instalment in the series, and while it won't convert unbelievers, perhaps that's because they've already convinced themselves it won't.



Confusingly, what we know as *Dynasty Warriors 6* is *Dynasty Warriors 5* in Japan, thanks to an earlier game being counted as part of the main series in the west but not in its homeland. And you thought it was already hard to tell the difference





# Gran Turismo 5 Prologue

Other than a handful of new additions, it's business as usual for the real driving simulator

**G**ran Turismo is nothing if not consistent. *Prologue* sits squarely on the trajectory of technological development that the original GT set out on almost exactly ten years ago. Its cars boast a perfect sheen and wealth of detail that the original so alluringly promised; its handling model is once again more refined and nuanced than its predecessors, yet feels like their direct descendent.

It therefore also has all of *Gran Turismo*'s characterlessness, a clinically glossy UI and some faintly bouncy light jazz doing so little



Many of the features in *Prologue* appear to be tuned in anticipation of the eventual release of *Home*, which will support various multiplayer social features, and other download bolt-ons, such as online multiplayer

to engender the adrenaline of racing. And gone are the drift challenges of *Gran Turismo HD Concept*. In their place are arcade and career mode races and the return of GT's classic win-cash-buy-steeds play structure.

Of *Prologue*'s five new tracks, London is the most immediately impressive, a detailed representation of the streets around Piccadilly Circus. But though they're realistically narrow, unlike those in *PGR*'s London, they're lifeless. It's down to GT's hard, exacting light, all the better to show up those metallic curves and perfect divisions between panels, but lacking in *PGR*'s atmospheric. More successful is Eiger Nordwand. Its dramatic switchbacks are more detailed even than the version in *HD Concept*, and remain hugely enjoyable to throw a car around. And it really is possible to throw them around – *Prologue* has professional and standard handling modes, but the cars are well behaved in both. The feel is as smooth as ever, with more than a little understeer, and rather dull.

Smooth, too, is the framerate – in the out-of-car views at least. Unfortunately, the in-car view is prone to screen tearing and



The early events of career mode consist of single races (of up to 16 competitors) on its five variably themed tracks. Only cars bought in career mode are available in arcade, which consists of time trials and races



slight judders, jarring with the technical sophistication of the rest of the game. What also jars is the audio, which sounds much the same as *GT* always has, forgoing the richness of the likes of *Dirt*. The overall effect is that, despite its flourishes, *GT* can feel outdated when compared to the best racing games of the last 12 months.



# Sins Of A Solar Empire

Ironclad, developer of *Galactic Civilizations 2*, scales up its ambition and takes its interplanetary strategy realtime

**I**f nothing else, *Sins Of A Solar Empire* eloquently conveys the staggering enormity of space. Combining *Civilization*'s macro perspective on exploration, research and resource management with realtime space combat, *Sins* necessarily allows you to scale the view of your domain. It does so fluidly, moving from a visualisation of space where planets are no more than tiny dots straight down to individual craft weaving around your ship.

In fact, so the claim goes, the engine behind the game could have permitted you



As well as combat, the game allows you to sabotage other factions via a relay of broadcast centres, making occupied planets discontent with their current rulers

to zoom down to the surface of each planet and take part in ground battles, but the idea of managing that along with the rest of your galactic empire proved too much. The game is already astonishing in its depth and level of detail, and though its developer has made efforts to make the interface user-friendly and allow for a degree of abstracted control, there is still a considerable amount to learn.

Three playable factions all have their own benefits, and for once it's more subtle than 'fast but weak' and 'slow but tough'. Here, their differences extend to the level of epic strategy – tech trees, planet preferences and resource needs all differ, making the long-term play-style of each faction as different as the tactics in individual battles.

Now in its fourth beta, Ironclad has continually tweaked the balance of *Sins*' offering, and by the time the game is released the developer should have it finely tuned. But regardless of the interplay of its nuances and the intensity of its detail, *Sins*' real success will be proved if it can convey the extent of its depth in a manner which can be easily absorbed.



FORMAT: PC  
PUBLISHER: STARDOCK  
DEVELOPER: IRONCLAD  
ORIGIN: US  
RELEASE: FEBRUARY

The AI is truly Machiavellian, its behaviour determined by the interaction between the motivations of individual ships, tactical and strategic aims, economics and diplomacy





FORMAT: PSP  
PUBLISHER: EMPIRE INTERACTIVE  
DEVELOPER: BUGBEAR  
ORIGIN: FINLAND  
RELEASE: 2008

## FlatOut Head On

The pretender to Burnout's crown manages to remain largely intact as it screeches on to PSP



Head On's physics feel a little more pedantic than in predecessors – it's sometimes difficult to tell whether objects will bounce off the bonnet harmlessly or send you spinning



**T**hough the *Burnout* franchise has graced major consoles with one instalment per year, handheld platforms haven't been given a taste since 2005's *Burnout Legends*. And so *Burnout*'s capable imitator and major challenger, *FlatOut*, steps into the gap with *Head On*.

Based on *FlatOut: Ultimate Carnage*, last year's competent offering on Xbox 360, *Head On* manages to replicate the sense of speed and mayhem with some technical flair – piling eight, highly destructible cars on the screen at any one time without the framerate suffering. It's a pleasant surprise to see just how complete a recreation this has been for the handheld, and how it benefits from refinements that attempt to tailor the title to the necessary immediacy of portable gaming, bringing a greater focus to the quick-play events and saving after the completion of every race within a cup.

All the familiar game modes return, although, alas, with many of their flaws intact; the campaign mode, with its emphasis on pole-position racing, has always been at odds with the franchise's delight in crashing.

Part of the problem is that, unlike in *Burnout*, races can often be decided within moments of the start – an early lead can easily be maintained, while the mayhem of the pack tends to be very difficult to escape. Fortunately, the returning Carnage mode mitigates many of these problems: instead of awarding victory for crossing the line first, this play option doles out points for smashing into opponents, providing an incentive to remain right inside the mix. Points are then multiplied depending on your position – creating a tension between finishing first and hanging back to ram competitors off the road.

With a clutter of other modes (including, of course, the ragdoll stunts in which you propel your driver's body through the windscreen), *Head On* looks to be more than usually fulsome for a portable racing title, and its technical accomplishments will ensure that it is one of the most explosive expressions of vehicular carnage as can be found on the PSP – until the *Burnout* franchise deigns to return to our handhelds, perhaps.



The PSP's D-Pad and analogue nub both do a decent job handline control. Inevitably, you miss the rumble of the Xbox 360 version, especially when things really pile up

## Phantasy Star Portable

Sega readies itself to boot Monster Hunter Portable from its position of PSP dominance

FORMAT: PSP  
PUBLISHER: SEGA  
DEVELOPER: ALPHA SYSTEM  
ORIGIN: JAPAN  
RELEASE: 2008

**I**n its time, *Phantasy Star Online* may well have been responsible for establishing the formula of the network RPG, but it was undoubtedly really Capcom which found the right formula of success in Japan. Selling over a million copies, Capcom's *Monster Hunter Portable* has become a cornerstone of PSP gaming – but it's more than that: gathering in public places to share the experience wirelessly has become a popular trend in Japan.

With the 20th anniversary of the *Phantasy Star* franchise in mind, Sega is going to take advantage of the massive popularity of this combination of platform and genre. The game is based on *Ambition Of The Illuminus*, the recently released expansion to *Phantasy Star Universe*, but has extra content and PSP-specific alterations.

While the story mode introduces a new scenario (taking place several months after the events detailed in *Ambition*), the network



Central to the appeal of online RPGs is the ability to fashion unique characters, and PSP is true to its roots

mode will almost certainly be the main focus of the game. The character-creation tool has been one of the most popular aspects of the *Online* series since its Dreamcast origins, and it returns here, although, worryingly, it's not yet been announced whether players' avatars from the offline story mode will be able to cross directly over into network play.

Similarly, nothing has yet been said about whether the game will be able to communicate with versions of *Universe* appearing on consoles. No doubt Alpha System has shown some nous in capitalising on the PSP RPG's increased profile, and with the *Phantasy Star* franchise the developer certainly has a solid heritage on which to build. Nonetheless, it would certainly have missed a trick if it were to overlook the alluring potential of interoperability, both between online and offline play and with other systems.



With Japanese sales of Sony's PSP overtaking those of Wii during the Christmas season, the release on the platform of one of the most famous and longest-running RPG franchises looks like it has to be a surefire success







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A dramatic, low-angle shot of a soldier in a combat vest and gloves, holding a rifle. The soldier is looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a bright, hazy sunset or sunrise over a field of tall grass. The overall tone is gritty and intense.

# HEART OF DAR



# KNESS

Far Cry exchanges lush tropical paradise for the red dirt and mosquitoes of central Africa

**T**he original *Far Cry* is *The Island Of Dr Moreau*, a story of a mad scientist that has unlocked the inner savagery in man and created literal monsters," says **Clint Hocking**, creative director of Ubisoft Montreal's true sequel to Crytek's open-world shooter. "But at the same time HG Wells was writing *Moreau*, Joseph Conrad was writing *Heart Of Darkness*, which actually has very similar themes. It's about someone in the jungle that has discovered and is leveraging man's inner madness, and become a metaphorical rather than literal monster. This is *Far Cry 2*."

Hocking is sitting in a small meeting room that opens into the large, open studio where 150 people are making a world set in a fictional 50 square kilometres of a central African failed state. They're also making a game engine, tailored for rendering seamless streamed environments. It's called *Dunia*, which means 'world' in Swahili, and

will be used extensively among Ubisoft's games for the coming few years. The team occupies a newly decorated floor of a shabby building that's just around the corner from Ubisoft's main development office, isolated from the rest of the company. It feels like a self-contained start-up, and for all the location might suggest that the team has been hidden away in embarrassment, it brims with the self-confidence that comes from being tasked with creating a game and shaping Ubisoft's future tech with enviable freedom.

Let's confirm something right now: "Don't expect mutants as some surprise later on," producer **Louis-Pierre Pharand** tells us. This is a rugged recreation of Africa that's more in tune

with the dreamy realism of Conrad's ambiguous portrayal of colonialism and base human nature than the science-fiction of Wells. "I want to create an analogue experience for the player. I want him to feel the grime under his fingernails, the sweat, smell the gun oil," says Hocking. "I wanted to create the guns jamming, the dust – the world isn't this clean, sterile, digital representation of Africa." As such it rather contrasts with the original game's somewhat clinical depiction of

TITLE: FAR CRY 2  
FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3  
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT  
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL  
ORIGIN: CANADA  
RELEASE: 2008





The team is careful to give glowing appraisals of *Crysis*, which *Far Cry 2* will probably never stop being compared to, both on a design and technical basis. "We have similar goals, but we have different ways of going about it – and it's a different game," says Guay

the blue skies and luxuriant vegetation of tropical islands, but it stays true to its mercenary-infested exoticism.

The expansive open world, comprising savannah, desert and jungle, dustbowl colonial towns, corrugated iron shanties and Dogon villages, is continuous, with new areas loading seamlessly. It can be traversed by one of many vehicles, which include rustbucket hatchbacks, roaring dune buggies, the ever-useful Land Rover, boats and a hang glider, and is fenced with a ring of impassable desert – venture in and your car will eventually overheat and you'll fall from heat exhaustion. Herd animals graze before fleeing at any disturbance, while grass, bushes and trees sway with the wind, which can boil up into dark squalls, sending leaves and branches flying and whipping the grass into waves. More than most virtual worlds, this one looks and feels deeply credible. Broad fronds of jungle undergrowth are translucent, with shadows from those above showing through, and orange dust is thick in the late afternoon



"I want the player to feel the grime under his fingernails. I want to create the guns jamming, the dust. This isn't a sterile version of Africa"

sun. The level of detail on the latest build is a good deal higher than that seen at *Far Cry 2*'s original unveiling at Leipzig in August.

**Great attention has** also been paid to the people who live in this world. The story goes that the country's government has collapsed at the hands of a popular uprising, but the rebels have since split into two opposing forces, the APR and the VFLL. Heading each are warlords who profit from prolonging conflict through the diamond trade, and profiting from the warlords is an arms dealer, the assassination of whom is the game's ultimate goal. Pharand runs a demo that begins in a dusty town with a river running through it, one side of which is dominated by the strongly dug-in APR, the other occupied by the VFLL. Chickens cluck amid a tense atmosphere as the player walks around. The APR mercenaries react to the player's presence, tolerating him but uneasy; they raise their guns in warning if he stares at them for



Ubisoft Montreal's Dunia engine is already proving adept at generating atmospheric vistas that characterise the time of day well, from rich glowing evening sunsets to watery morning light

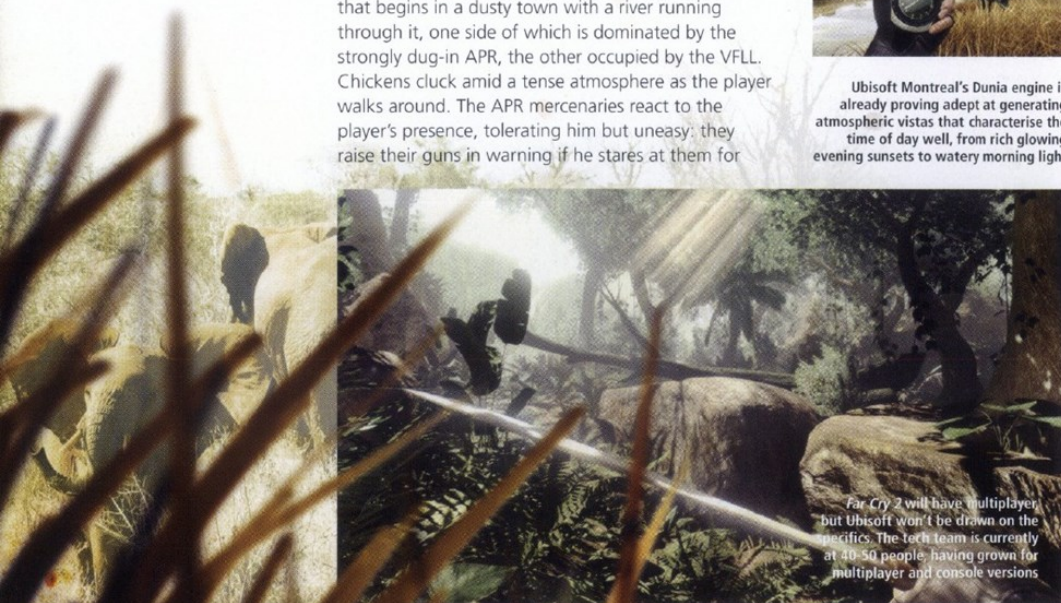
too long, but they're hesitant to begin firing. Their behaviour is the result of *Far Cry 2*'s reputation system – act the badass by winning battles and being ruthless and you'll gain edgy respect among the two groups, allowing you to rise up their command structures to close in on the arms dealer.

They won't tolerate him stealing their Land Rover, though, and the clapped-out, unguarded Datsun probably won't make it up the steep hill to the next mission objective. Nipping in to take it sparks a quick response, the town erupting in gunfire and shouts as the truce between the two sides breaks and members of the APR chase after the player. Without comparable vehicles, they quickly fall

behind, and Pharand drives up a steep track to arrive at one of the game's many encampments. Here, 'buddies' – in this case a grimy, tattooed man called Marty – hang out, NPCs who will help the player if they should fall in battle nearby, carrying them to cover and providing support. There are 13 in total, and should they die helping you, they are gone from the game for good.

Camps also act as points where you can sleep to advance time. Because NPCs behave according to schedules, attacking at night might give an opportunity to catch them slumbering. The feature also shows off the Dunia engine's notable ability to render evocatively atmospheric vistas as time is sped up, showing burnished evening smoothly turning to blue night and into hazy pale morning. Animals, too, behave differently according to the time of day, an important detail given the fact that the enemy AI will be alarmed if you inadvertently startle a nearby herd.

Near Marty's camp is a Dogon village, characterised by distinctive mud architecture clinging to a steep, rocky hillside. Its original inhabitants are gone and it's now occupied by mercenaries. *Far Cry 2* doesn't have civilians that players can kill, a decision that Pharand says was a point of honour for the team. "Our game is about hunting down a guy and being in the middle of a conflict. When you allow killing of civilians you're muddying your themes," says Hocking. As a result, the only times that you face civilians, or other characters



*Far Cry 2* will have multiplayer but Ubisoft won't be drawn on the specifics. The tech team is currently at 40-50 people, having grown for multiplayer and console versions



To ease the burden on artists to build innumerable models of trees and bushes, the Dunia engine procedurally 'grows' them. As in *Crysis*, vegetation is cut down by gunfire and vehicles, but will slowly regrow over time



&lt; Louis-Pierre Pharand



&lt; Clint Hocking



&lt; Dominic Guay

## PORT IN A STORM

Though not shown in any form during our presentation, the team has confirmed that it is working on 360 and PS3 versions of *Far Cry 2*, with a 'no-compromise ethic', according to technical director Guay. "I believe we will have a consistent experience," he says, delicately. "PC owners playing the console version will feel they've played the same game. Obviously there are some things that can't be done, but it's going to look surprisingly good." Enemy AI and the world's geography will be identical as the project does not have separate art and design teams. The inevitable concessions will be with losing the enormously high texture resolutions found in the PC version, along with higher-end graphic effects.

that you shouldn't kill, the game contrives to ensure your weapons are removed first.

The mercenaries in the village are tending a crop of *Artemisia annua*, a plant that produces the anti-malarial drug artemisinin. The developer is keen to afford *Far Cry 2*'s world a convincing representation of life, with enemies conversing, working and sleeping, even if the engine currently renders them with a somewhat waxy sheen. And most people have malaria, including the player character. In fact, the game starts with him incapacitated by it, the arms dealer he's tasked to assassinate at his bedside mocking him for having failed at his task. As such, the game has the player having to procure anti-malarial medicine from an underground organisation of priests and doctors that is helping civilians escape the country.

**This conceit introduces** a neat way of structuring the increase in power the player character experiences over the game's course: as he takes more medicine, he becomes healthier and can take more damage. Combined with a segmented health system, which requires the use of syrettes to replenish bars as they're depleted, it's also designed to cope with an open world in which encounters with any group of enemies should be challenging and interesting, whether an isolated pair or a whole encampment. "We originally wanted a regenerative system like *Halo*, but we found that once you put it into the open world you'd have full health against two guys, or full health against 25. Because we'd need to make the health high enough to deal with 25 guys, two guys will never be a challenge," explains Hocking. A quick encounter with a couple of soldiers can easily cost a bar or two. To systematically increase the game's difficulty as it progresses, the design will manage access to weapons and health-giving syrettes, as well as enemy behaviour. "They will start being able to use grenades and flanking, cornering you in interiors because they know where the exits are," says technical director **Dominic Guay**.

Receiving major damage results in wounds, which will kill if not tended to in time, and if hit while fixing it up – with a graphic animation of wrenching out the bullet – you'll be killed instantly. In comparison to older

builds, such as the Leipzig demo, wounds are appearing a lot less often – on average every 30 minutes, according to Hocking – to retain some of the punch of seeing foreign bodies removed from the flesh between your virtual fingers. It's still a little odd, however, that in the current build only your feet and hands appear to be susceptible to such trauma.

It does add, however, to the game's physicality. The movement of the firstperson view as the player is rescued by Marty during an intense battle among some rusty iron shacks conveys the sense of a heavy man being slung over a shoulder, and when getting in and out of a vehicle, or switching between a Land Rover's driver's seat and a gun mounted in the back, the player character's arms are seen swinging from overhead struts. But, though *Far Cry 2* occasionally shows off the character's body during specific sequences, not even his feet are visible during normal play. "It was a direction I gave very early on, that I didn't want to see the body unless it's important," says Hocking. "If every time I look down and not see my legs perfectly animated when I rotate I feel I have this fake body. So when you do see it, it's perfectly in tune with the environment, but when I don't need to be aware of my body and it's not expressing the themes, it's invisible."

Pharand runs two different attacks on the village – an all-out assault and a stealthy attempt – to



Vehicles appear to handle convincingly, a result of a team member having worked on DICE's *Rallisport Challenge*. Each will feature a destruction model and will be repairable, so players will be able to hang on to particular favourites



One of the current challenges for the team is how persistent to make the world; too persistent and it will become denuded and boring, not persistent enough and players will be able to 'reset' enraged powerful enemies by running away

demonstrate the variety of play styles the game supports. The small, closely built Dogon huts provide lots of cover for the stealth approach, and he quickly takes down many of the soldiers in the village itself up close with a silenced MP5 submachine gun. But he soon attracts the keen eye of a sniper on a ridge opposite the village and is pinned down, galvanising the rest of the brigade's attention on him. It's at this point that it's clear guile is key, for there's no radar in *Far Cry 2*, just a detailed map that's brought up in the player character's hand which shows your location without pausing the action. The state of nearby enemies, whether at rest, alert or actively engaged in attacking the player, is communicated through music.

The assault method seems to work a little better. Using a powerful automatic shotgun, Pharand tears through many of the village's enemies, but with use the weapon begins to dull and show wear. It's one of *Far Cry 2*'s features that emphasises the gritty representation of conflict that Hocking is after: depending on the model, the guns will fail under heavy use. An AK-47 will tend to last much longer, tallying with its real-world reputation for reliability, but a powerful weapon like the auto-shotgun will break down much more quickly. And apart from supporting the game's themes, it's also a subtle way of regulating the effectiveness of the player's arsenal.

Luckily, the gun doesn't jam, and Pharand finds ammunition at the ammo stores dotted around the village. Containing limited supplies that are visually depicted, ammo dumps can also be detonated in a dramatic explosion of pops and crackles as shells discharge, rounds chaotically lancing out and ricocheting all around. Running from wall to wall, the slide-to-cover move is shown off, a prone skid, legs in view, that snaps to the nearest cover. The sniper is soon on to him, though – and taking up a discarded AK-47, Pharand attempts to shoot back, exposing how inaccurate the gun is at this range. After a scrappy exchange of shots the sniper eventually falls, and



## CONTINENTAL SHIFT

Members of the development team travelled to Kenya to research the realities of Africa, but only after an advisor had insisted they do so. "It was the best investment we've made in the project," says Pharand. Before the trip, he admits that their representation of Africa was stuck in a firmly north American vision of the continent. Having seen its reddish earth and experienced the way it ingrains itself into clothing and skin so pervasively has, Pharand claims, profoundly changed the game. Incidental NPC conversations now include stories they heard on the trip, and they're trying to decide whether to incorporate the fact that a Land Rover's tyres squeal when skidding on earth as if they're on tarmac. The worry is that players might find the reality too far-fetched.





Pharand runs across a rope bridge to the ridge he occupied. There's an alternative route, a snaking, steep path that curves around the promontory, and Pharand brings out his flamethrower to show off one of *Far Cry 2*'s big features: fire. Burning up the rope bridge will funnel pursuing enemies up the path, affording him some control over their attack.

With much of *Far Cry 2*'s world being composed of highly flammable scrub, fire is more than a gimmick. It can be used to flush enemies out of cover or cut off flanking manoeuvres – and it can easily backfire. As fire



To Guay, developing a game alongside its host engine has both problems and benefits: "We have all the experts on the team – if there's a problem there's always someone who knows the solution. But we're not flawless, and when you have 25, 30 artists, mistakes can be costly. Once we ship, making another game will be a lot easier."

Darkness theme falls into better focus. With an entire country pitted against players, they're going to have to use nasty tactics to get their way. As the anti-malarial drugs increase their health, so too will their reputations for being ruthless: incinerating enemies, wounding them to draw out their comrades. "What happens is dependent on how each player approaches it, but somewhere in the second act you become so notorious and feared that the underground [of medics and priests] says that you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem, and stops giving you medicine," says Hocking. The result is a twist on, or reversal of, *Far Cry Instincts*' feral abilities. "As medicine is cut off you become sickly and grotesque, but still more notorious," Hocking continues. "You transform from being this healthy guy that might occasionally shoot someone in the knee to somebody that's literally dependent on being cruel and vicious, twisted and

deformed and vomiting all the time. You invert your relationship with your own power – from being powerful because you're healthy to powerful because you're crueller than the enemy."

It's the core theme of the game, making players realise by the end of the game that the way they got to where they have is through being a scumbag, and possibly worse than the person they've been sent to kill. Though it's broadly similar to *BioShock*'s opposing of personal choice against narrative destiny, again told against the backdrop of an assassination, here the tension is a direct product of game mechanics, rather than *BioShock*'s immutable, scripted plotting, and it has the potential to be all the more powerful for it.

Ubisoft Montreal is applying this organic approach to game building to every part of *Far Cry 2*. The result, so far, looks coherent and convincing: Every mechanic has a tactical purpose and sits in the world consistently, fleshing out a plausible and absorbing environment. What remains to be seen is how they will balance each other out, and whether the open world will provide enough direction and motivation to fully engage players. But the conviction with which the team presents it suggests that they believe they have the solution to this dark alchemy of grime, sweat and moral uncertainty.

## Fire is more than a gimmick, and is used to flush out enemies or cut off flanking manoeuvres – and it can easily backfire



With a focus on long-range planning and engagement, the area that the game simulates varies, dependent on how far the player can see – in a jungle it's not very far, but when gliding, the world is alive within an 800m radius

will spread according to the wind, it's important to use the game's eyeglass, which apart from acting as binoculars includes a wind direction indicator. The most effective way of starting fires is, naturally, with the flamethrower, but they can

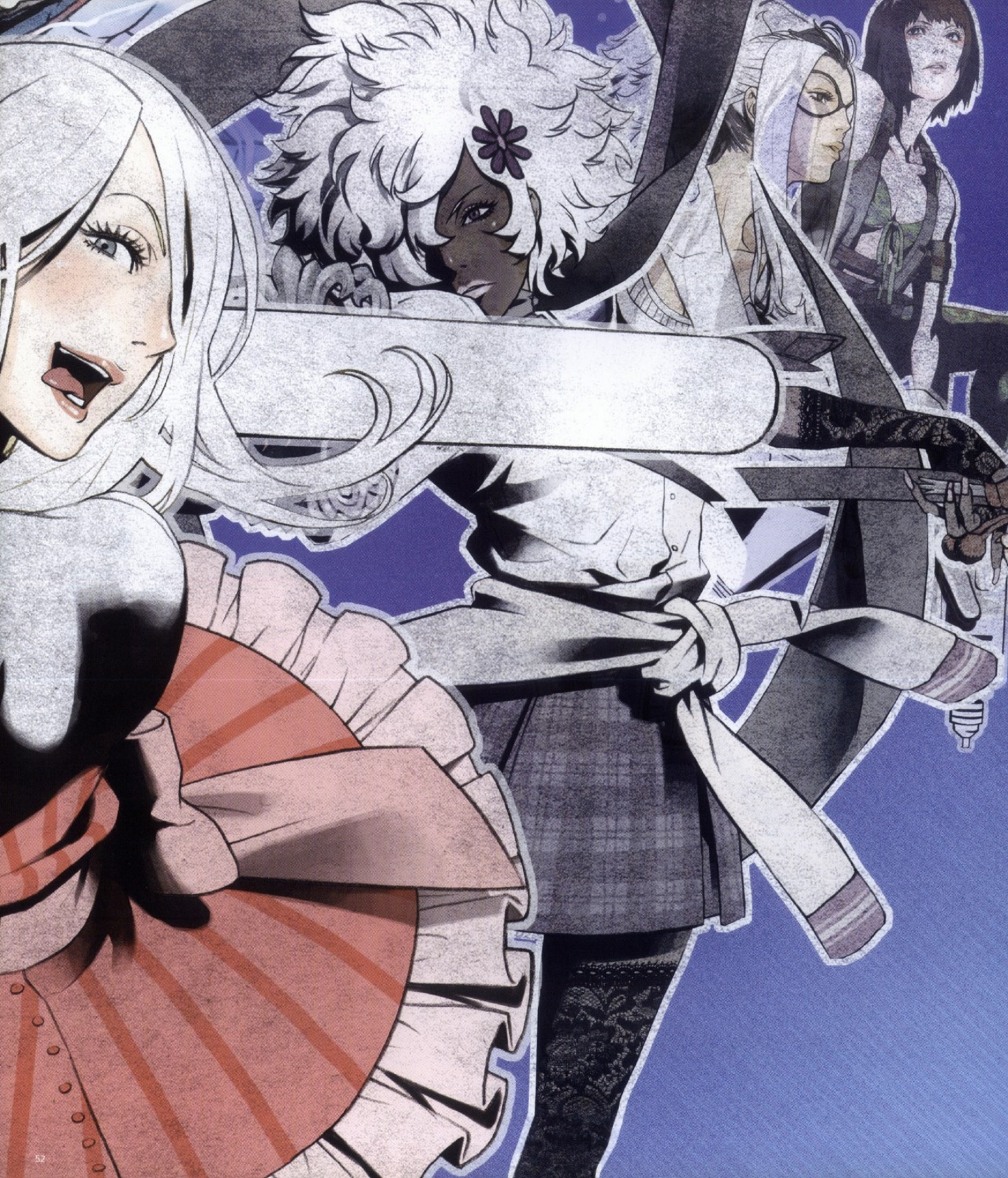
also be set off by explosions. The strength of the conflagration depends on several factors: its origin – if the result of a sustained burst from the flamethrower, it'll burn strongly; if from the detonation of a grenade, it won't – and the flammability of material on which it begins. In other words, fires are not endless.

With Pharand on the ridge, he takes the sniper's rifle and shoots a mercenary in the leg. He falls to the ground, and soon another comes out from cover to carry him to safety, despite the danger of him becoming a target, too. It's here that the Heart Of



The reputation system extends to meetings with faction heads: walking around their offices, your character will interact with things like cigar cases, brazenly stuffing a few Cubans in his top pocket if his reputation is high







# Suda 51 revisited

**As *No More Heroes* sees release, Goichi Suda talks Wii, the changing nature of gamers, and where the future lies for Grasshopper**

**T**he CEO and lead producer of Grasshopper Manufacture slouches back in his chair. We're in west Tokyo with **Goichi Suda**, at the new headquarters GHM now calls home. The move is at least partly a reflection of the company's growth, now approaching 50 employees, but also an expression of a collaborative ethic that means all of those employees, including Suda himself, now have their desks on a shared single floor – because it makes work “easier and friendlier”. Suda's relaxing for a reason: it's several weeks since people first got their hands on *No More Heroes* at the TGS, and he's just personally handed the master version over to Nintendo. We sat down with the undertaker who became one of gaming's most brilliant stylists to discuss the game, Nintendo's Wii, and the development from concept to product.

**It's been some time since our first look at *No More Heroes* [E171]. Now that the game's finished, how do you feel about developing on Wii?**

The Wii is a unique platform, and has a huge population of users who are not familiar with videogaming: I was aware of that, but I also felt the need to live up to gamers' expectations as well. Then I realised that for all of these players, an action game on the Wii may actually be their first experience of that type. The game uses both the Wii Remote and buttons, and these two control philosophies mixing together were fundamental to the game working in an accessible and enjoyable way.

The experience of playing had to be user friendly, yet not without a level of depth. That was the real challenge. *NMH* is an action game, so we had to think about what level of difficulty would keep the experience enjoyable: the critical thing, I think, was to balance the difficulty, or if you prefer the accessibility, and I hope we've achieved that.

**How did you find working with the Wii Remote?**

Well, actually 70 per cent of the game is controlled using



Photography: Hiroki Izumi





buttons. The motion is used at key moments like when you finish your enemy. That way, it brings a connection with the key moment of the action experience. At the beginning of the project, I thought I would only use motions for that very moment when you finish your adversary. That was in the initial game concept. But then I felt the need to offer more in the game, like the extra moves and recharging and other little touches. So I experienced no real difficulty in working with the Wii Remote; in fact, I found it made me think further.

**As the project progressed, did you have to rethink any part of the design?**

Actually, no. We started to build the small town, which is the hub of the game, aiming for the size it is now. Then we worked on the 'dungeon' levels separately, and as we started to implement the submissions inside the town we had the game running as we first imagined it. The game is almost exactly the same as initially conceived. Sometimes, I did feel I

The art direction of *No More Heroes* is exceptional – but we would say that, after Suda was kind enough to present us with a picture of Travis sporting a particularly natty T-shirt







As has been widely noted, killing opponents in the PAL release results in a spray of pixels and coins rather than blood – there are issues around the representation of violence, but here the change is in the game's favour

wanted to try to do much more, but then you are limited to what can be held on the disc. But as it is now, the game is really like my initial vision of it.

**This is the most powerful hardware you've worked on to date, but it can't offer graphics on a par with other platforms; was it this that led to the game's distinctive look?**

I think graphics are actually something very hard to define. If you think of what the PS3 or the Xbox 360 delivers as 'graphics', then you will notice a gap. But if you consider *Resident Evil 4* as perhaps the best that a GameCube can deliver, then you know that you can at least do the same on the Wii. That's the functional side, but really graphics are about what you want to show in the game. My first vision of the game was Travis facing a number of opponents. That is one aspect I wanted to keep. Overall, I think we managed to deliver that vision with a good graphical representation. In that sense, I don't see graphics as an issue in this game at all.

**In the action part of the game, the moment when Travis finishes his adversaries is quite bloody in the American version. Was that always OK with Nintendo?**

Indeed it was. But it's an important point that the game is different in different territories. The Japanese and European versions have no blood and



HDTV owners: if you haven't bought a component cable for your Wii yet, then *NMH* should be the stimulus you need to pop out to the shops – the environments may be nothing especially stunning, but the characters are



you simply kill those enemies. The US version is the closest to my initial vision of the game. The issue of having blood spilt is an interesting one. Today's technology makes a very realistic visual experience possible, so does that mean blood has to be sprayed all around? I'm not sure. There is, in terms of videogames, almost a natural absence of blood: you kill an enemy and that's all. The opposite we're now seeing, without going into too high a level of

**"Today's technology makes a very realistic visual experience possible, so does that mean blood has to be sprayed all around? I'm not sure"**

photorealism, is that you may feel the need to show blood on the screen to serve the action. Now, if you decide that action games as a whole can't have blood on screen, from a user's point of view that may make a particular game look quite unrealistic and actually harm the experience you are trying to deliver. It is still too early to see if the issues of graphic violence and blood are important because, in terms of fidelity, they are new – or if we'll become accustomed to these sights as natural as technologies and minds move on. But I think that perhaps the bigger issue is shielding people from any form of violence.

**No More Heroes is a new type of game for Grasshopper; did you feel a bit anxious about trying to create an action experience and blend it with city sections?**

*Samurai Champloo* [a PS2 game for Bandai Namco] was our first try at a full-map game experience, and our first challenge in the sword action field. The feedback then was good and that told us we were on the right track. So we weren't that concerned about our potential to deliver a true action experience. I was more concerned with how users will actually understand the use of the Wii Remote motions during the action sequence. Would they be able to do it naturally

or would they do the wrong motion? But watching players at the TGS showed me it would be OK.

**Are you happy with the bike?**

I wanted to do more with it, but you need to set limits. In the game it is very much about transportation. But this is a small map, so what you can enjoy in *GTA* with cars and the opportunities to do what you want with them in different ways, the little surprises they hide for you, can't really be reproduced at the same level on a much smaller map.

**Genki Rockets [an otherwise anonymous band Tetsuya Mizuguchi is involved with] have been linked to *No More Heroes*. How did this come about?**

I was invited to the Q Entertainment party, and that music was played in the background. It was actually one of my first encounters with Mizuguchi-san. And we were talking about a track playing in the background, I said it was cool and, just a throwaway remark, I told him it would be great if I could use it for one of my future games. Then he had a very cool reaction: "Yeah, no problem." This is how I got the green light to use the first track from the Genki Rockets! There's a friendship between us and I felt such a collaboration would be really great.







## Grasshopping on the internet

The Grasshopper Manufacture website is an experience well worth the time, not least for the unlikely alternation between classic design and horribly garish lime and pink colours. There's a news feed, sections containing Suda's replies to fan mail (in Japanese) and the chance to purchase various merchandise from GHM titles – currently dominated by *No More Heroes* T-shirts, which are quickly selling out. Best of all, the company's ethos couldn't be plainer (although it could perhaps benefit from some cleaner expression) in the greeting given on the first page to new visitors: 'Rock Fuckin' GHM' goes the legend. Indeed: [www.grasshopper.co.jp](http://www.grasshopper.co.jp)



You can go for training at the gym, but *NMH*'s world is definitely built on 'no pain, no gain', and after you've paid the man you have to complete a relatively arduous training session to feel the benefit of your investment

With *Killer 7* and now *No More Heroes*, most people probably think that Grasshopper is visually all about stylish cel-shading on Nintendo platforms. Is that an image you want to change in the near future?

Grasshopper is indeed about a very special visual touch. This originality will always remain, but I also want us to challenge ourselves by working at making realistic visuals as well. The next title will have a very different style, but keep the Grasshopper feeling at the same time.

With all the talent involved in this project, do you feel Travis and his world will go on to other adventures in the future, or new horizons beyond videogames?

We had tremendous support from [publisher] Marvelous when we first presented the idea. It is in part because of the talent of the artists we worked with who created very charismatic designs. I really would like Travis to exist beyond *No More Heroes* for the Wii. When I first imagined this world, I thought it could be expanded, and when you finish the game you'll hopefully feel that too. So, if we have the chance, perhaps this might become Grasshopper's first expanding IP.

It seems you manage to work with some of the most celebrated names in the Japanese videogame industry. How and why do you do



Aボタンでビーム・カタナをお振りになれます ビーム・カ

Early reports indicate that *No More Heroes* hasn't sold very well in its home territory, which is a great pity for two reasons; this offbeat punk ode deserves a wide audience, and it's one of the first truly substantial thirdparty efforts for Nintendo's Wii that isn't a collection of minigames or a port





The hub world is relatively small, but it's far from empty, with new bits and bobs appearing frequently, and shops where you can spruce up Travis with funky new threads. (Like all decent T-shirts, though, they're a rip-off)

#### that, and is there always harmony between charismatic creators?

I don't think I could explain why. Maybe I'm easy to meet because I'm not a publisher! I'm a small and independent developer, and there aren't mountains of legal paperwork to get through to talk with me. And of course these are human relationships; they're my friends. In terms of the way we work, I think I'm best suited to working with people who are more 'veteran' than myself. That kind of hierarchy works fine. If you take Mikami-san [Shinji Mikami, best known for the *Resident Evil* series], he's not only more of a veteran than me but older as well. So our professional relationship is very clear. If you're both

"Grasshopper is about a very special visual touch, but I also want to challenge ourselves by working on realistic visuals as well. Our next title will have a very different style"

on the same level then there are confrontations at certain points, which might be good sometimes in terms of ideas but sometimes might harm the project. In my case, it works because of the relationship between a producer and a director. But those collaborations aren't something I'm trying to do, but things which happen because of circumstances.

#### You moved your HQ: do you see that as a chance to make changes, expand or rethink things with Grasshopper?

With *Killer 7*, a door was opened overseas for us. At the moment, I'm working with a Japanese publisher. But I think it's very possible that we'll work with an overseas publisher in the US or Europe and try to deliver games for a different market. That's maybe the path I would like to try out from now.

#### You attended GDC for the first time in 2007; what did you bring back from it?

I went from surprise to surprise. It's really a unique place where technology and creativity from various markets meet and mingle. Europeans and Americans share a common language, and that's in contrast to

us Japanese who have our own.

From that point of view, it may seem difficult to work on the overseas stage, and I feel a gap expanding. I really feel that overseas is taking a technological lead. In Japan, there is the will to have some kind of GDC as well but it won't be close to what is organised in the US. Then again, don't be too negative, because I think there is still time for the Japanese game industry to fill that gap. But it's always important to remember the truth that games are not always about technology.

**At the moment, the market is very much dominated by Nintendo, and Microsoft is doing well in the US. Sony hasn't had much success thus far with PS3, but do you think the latest 40GB version might stir up more interest in Japan?**

I think this makes the platform affordable. But it's always all about the games. The software is the key, and titles not only have to appeal now but give a reason to buy a PS3 over another platform.

#### Which platform would you like to work with in the future?

The Xbox 360. Definitely, I want to develop on this platform. It is really easy to work with. It is also quite popular outside Japan on markets that I would like to aim at. Specifically, I think of the American market as the Major League – I would like to go there and be successful.









# OF MOUSE AND MAN

No, he's not taking the Mickey. Warren Spector has gone from *Deus Ex* and *System Shock* to making fun for all at Disney. And, what's more, he loves it

**T**he Hammersmith offices of Disney are undoubtedly the business end of the Magic Kingdom. The toons don't parade, but rather loom from the walls like company directors, their mischief and mayhem trapped behind glass, cut out of cardboard and frozen in Polystone statues. The closest you'll get to a cel-shaded riot is the music playing in the lifts. The only big-screen escapism

is a videoconference to offices elsewhere. On this particularly dreary afternoon, in fact, the most animated thing in the place isn't Buzz Lightyear or Donald Duck, but the man behind *Deus Ex*.

Few of **Warren Spector's** games, among them also *Thief*, *Ultima Underworld* and *System Shock*, work out as you'd expect, so it figures that we should find him here, crowded by characters from the movie *Enchanted* (sitting there from an earlier interview, and not one with Spector). Outside is Ralph Erskine's *The Ark*, the boat-shaped skyscraper which, Spector marvels, would make an excellent venue for a videogame. And somehow it's raining in two opposite directions, as if to provide

the most fitting backdrop for this occasion. We're here, after all, to find out why the master of dark, cerebral adventure games is suddenly working for the House of Mouse.

Bought by Disney Interactive Studios in July 2007, Spector's Junction Point Studio joins the UK's Climax Racing Studio, Canada's Propaganda Games (now developing *Turok*) and Avalanche Software (not the *Just Cause* guys, but the US veteran of licensed genre games). There's a sense of mutual opportunism to this sudden push, Disney looking for a mix of experience, talent and technology, the studios flattered by the interest of a cross-media giant with renewed focus on games. But Spector's involvement is more personal, even borderline religious. At university, his Masters thesis charted the evolution of Disney characters from 'Chaplin-esque comics to costumed adventurers'. Prior to work on electronic games he made *Toon*, the cartoon RPG, for Steve Jackson Games. His post-*Deus Ex* resume is peppered with advisory on







further cartoon licences. Really, is there any surprise to this encounter at all?

"Why would I want to create 'Dragonslayer' when I could do a Donald Duck adventure?" he beams, jetlagged but in full defiant force. "Disney has created the most recognisable icons on the planet. Literally, this company has a hold on people's imaginations which is unparalleled – and it has been for 80 years. So the opportunity to play in those particular playgrounds... I mean, I love comics but it's not like I burn to make a Spider-Man game or a Superman game. But when you start talking about Donald, Goofy, Uncle Scrooge – those are characters I'd love to play with. And I wanted to be an Imagineer, you know? I wanted to create theme park attractions when I was younger, and I never got the opportunity. So now, indirectly, I get to do that."

That there are two sides to the man is obvious: one made *Deus Ex* while the other, by his own admission, owns a pair of round plastic ears and wishes he'd brought them along. The mistake is to think they're mutually exclusive – that one side makes smart computer games while the other dreams in pastel colours and rhyme. His masterpieces, produced at Origin, Looking Glass and Ion Storm, all thrive on a conflict of these two personalities. *Wing Commander* included, all are improbable clashes of the deep and the accessible, the fun and the demanding. And Disney, he explains,





appreciates this entirely. "I tell everyone I partner with: 'If that's not the kind of game you want then I'm not the man to be working with'. Disney didn't blink, so that's the kind of game we're gonna make."

This studio debut, no longer an original, episodic adventure to be delivered via Steam, is such a fiercely guarded secret that even this notorious motormouth is keeping schtum. All the juicy details must be itching at the back of his throat, but not once during a fast-flowing Q&A does he scratch. The closest we get to a reveal is that it's a "licensed game", and that despite a vocal desire to tackle Disney properties X, Y and Z, instead he was given Q. "Which was cool," he adds. "It's a challenge."

**It certainly is.** Disney characters aren't like comic-book heroes, gifted with powers and backstories. They don't dictate any particular style of game, though Spector does draw the line when it's suggested that they're blank slates. "What they are, I think, is well known," he says. "When you mention Donald Duck, everybody gets a flash of a crazed, feathers-flying, angry duck. You say Mickey Mouse and people get a different picture: nice, suburban, whatever. The interesting opportunity for me is to remind people what made them as popular and great as they were, because they've changed over the years. That's an opportunity for Disney which I don't think they're exploiting. In terms of the games I'd like to make, it's not black-and-white. What I hope to do with those characters, when I'm given the opportunity, is to allow players to test what they feel about them. Who are Chip 'n' Dale? Y'know? So they're not blank slates: they have very specific traits that are very well understood inside of Disney, and I think intuitively understood outside. So you can play with that, or undercut it. Subvert it, maybe."

It's still problematic, we insist, if not in characterisation then in situation. The toons of old were often playful comments on the world around them – sitcom characters, essentially. Where's the wish-fulfillment potential in that? Where's the hook? Spector agrees. "There is a very definite feeling as you watch Disney cartoons, and as you try to think about how one might adapt those to an interactive form, about what it is that

## » Future shock

This is, incredibly, the first time Spector's been asked about *Deus Ex 3* by someone other than his friends. Does he have any hope for Eidos Montreal's sequel? "I always have hope, but it is very weird. *Deus Ex* is a very delicate thing and I'm definitely concerned about whether people who've never worked on it are gonna get it. I'm encouraged by the fact that a lot of guys very highly placed inside

Eidos did talk to me and wanted me to participate. I couldn't because I'm a part of Disney, obviously, but I've spoken to people who seem to really care. I hope they do it right and send me beta versions without telling anybody, and I won't tell anybody at Disney. But it doesn't make it any easier for me, personally. I mean, JC and Paul, and Alex Jacobson and Tracer Tong – oh God, I love those guys."



these characters actually do. What things happen to them? From a game design perspective, we have to [return] to where they were active, engaged, mischievous – defeating giants at the tops of beanstalks."

When Disney asked him which properties he'd like to work with, Spector didn't ask for Goofy, Snow White or even a *Kingdom Hearts*-style mélange of the company's entire output. He asked for Carl Barks' entire output instead (though this doesn't relate to his current work). Barks, who died aged 99 in 2000, was the quintessential adventure comic artist, a Disney studio illustrator responsible for turning Donald Duck into an intrepid explorer, with an uncle named Scrooge and nephews Huey, Looney and Dewey. "You go back to those stories today and kids love 'em, adults love 'em," Spector explains. "They were like Indiana Jones stories. And there was an attempt a couple of years ago to do Duck Tales, which tried to adapt some of them. But they younged 'em up."

"I love games that are about shades of



**"I love games that are about shades of grey. With Disney, good defeats evil. So I'm trying to wrap my head around that"**

grey – stories where there's no right and wrong. And with Disney there's basically a hero and a villain, and good defeats evil. So I'm trying to wrap my head around how I'm gonna deal with that directive; it really is part of the core culture of the company. But the real key for me is player choice and consequence, and I don't think you need moral or ethical ambiguity to get into that. We'll see how right I am."

Fail gloriously. That's Spector's motto, even if few of his games warrant such conditional praise. But with games such as *Mass Effect* flitting back and forth between moral poles, asking surprisingly little of either themselves or their players, you see where he's coming from. Years after *Deus Ex* dropped you square in the midst of a socio-ethical crossfire, games have fallen back to a level of sub-Jerry Springer sermonising.

"I've certainly thought about what BioWare does," says Spector. "It's kind of like a kissing cousin to what I do, just like what Peter Molyneux does, and even *Grand Theft Auto* and *Half-Life*. I'm just in a different

place in the continuum. I do think that – I shouldn't say this with a Disney person in the room – it seems to be true that the simpler kinds of choice and consequence are easier for people to grasp. So their games do tend to outsell mine. But I've always sold well enough to fund the next game, which is always the goal. Yeah, I like a little less of a binary approach, and actually like an approach that has less *dialogue*. Oh my God, BioWare's games have tons."

"One thing *Mass Effect* has done – and I've seen the game enough to speak cogently about it at a very shallow level – is that the characters really do look like they're better actors than we've ever seen. And that's a necessary advancement no matter what game you're making. *Alyx* in *Half-Life 2* was a step forward, the characters in *Mass Effect* were another. I wish we weren't making those steps forward in the hyper-real world but in a more iconic way; I think that has more potential. But they're making progress. I can't speak for whether they've done it right or not, but it's vital we look for ways to make non-action parts of our games as compelling and interesting as the action parts. So the fact that BioWare tried to do a dynamic conversation system – more power to 'em."

And this knowledge translates, presumably. "One would hope so – that we could, y'know, rip 'em off. The funniest story about that is... you remember *Trespasser*? Seamus Blackey, who directed that, and a bunch of the designers were all buddies of mine from Looking Glass. And I was at an ECTS show right here in London, and they asked me to play their beta. So I sat down and played for about three hours one night and I got done, pushed the keyboard away, and they're all looking at me as if to say: 'Well, what did ya think?' And I said: 'You just showed me everything I needed to know to kick your ass and destroy it. Thank you'. I mean, the game is much maligned now but it really pointed the way towards a more simulation-driven, physics-driven approach which *Ion Storm* exploited. And that Valve's exploiting, certainly. Showing people a new way, even if you don't get it right – that's a good thing. It's OK."

**Not quite egotistical** enough to cast himself as a kind of gaming oracle, Spector does appreciate his role as a sharer of







knowledge, just as he did during the twilight of *Ion Storm*. But having taken his eye off the ball with *Deus Ex: Invisible War* (his words, not ours), it remains to be seen how he'll cope with the infinite distractions of the Disney empire. For its R&D and Imagineering departments, especially, he has a torrential enthusiasm. "Those are the guys who set the air on fire with industrial-grade lasers – for fun, right? The level of talent and smarts at Disney is un-be-lievable. Right now I'm working on a story – this hasn't happened yet so it may still fall through – but it's looking pretty good that our producer out in Glendale can hook us up with the lead writer for Disney feature animation. Oooh-kay...

"If I had a little checklist of things – all right, maybe I have Asperger's or something, but I *do* have a little checklist of things I'm gonna do before I die. Working for Disney was one of them and I can tick that one off now. Producing a movie's another one. I don't need to direct and I don't want to write it, but I simply want to make a movie. I want to put together the team; I want to conceive it; I wanna do it. For a company like Disney, which is in every business, I think it's important that people understand the ways they can help each other – to know where there is overlap and where they can learn from each other. And it's equally important for people to understand how they're different.

"The reason I want an hour with John Lasseter [very much Spector's double at Pixar, splitting his time between moviemaking and a chief advisory role at Walt Disney Imagineering] – which theoretically I will get at some point – is not so much to get his







Highlights of Spector's career to date (from top left to bottom right, by row):

*Space Rogue* (1989)  
*Wing Commander* (1990)  
*Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (1992)  
*System Shock* (1994)  
*Thief: The Dark Project* (1998)  
*Deus Ex* (2000)  
*Deus Ex: Invisible War* (2003)  
*Thief: Deadly Shadows* (2004)

blessing on a game, or so he can teach me, though there are things I know he will teach me. It's because I want to sit down and say: 'OK, John, there are movie stories and there are games stories – and they are different. And if you're gonna help us, which you clearly can, you need to understand the differences'. It is not possible for John Lasseter or anyone else, currently, to go to a university or read books and understand how games work. That's why there needs to be teaching both ways. And there aren't that many places where you can even do that. Inside Disney, there's that opportunity."

One of several history lessons ensues, about how Disney trained traditional artists as animators during the '30s, and how its funding of student art institutes has evolved into, among other things, internal forums and lecture series. Of particular interest is a series of 80-odd DVDs circulated internally – a peerless pool of industry knowhow. "Oh my God, if you could get your hands on them," he gushes. "They get guys like Spielberg and Ray Bradbury and Ray Harryhausen and Vilmos Zsigmond, and all sorts of people inside Disney, and they just record those people talking for an hour, about Disney animation, telling stories, lighting to create a mood, how we did things on *Sleeping Beauty* – whatever. I've watched all of them and they're *fantastic*. They get circulated all around so all that learning can be transmitted. And there is nothing on any of those 80 discs about games, interactivity, or any of that kind of stuff. I'd love it if we could just add one or two or three."

There have already been two casualties of Spector fulfilling, or at least embarking upon, his Disney dream, the first being a recently announced John Woo collaboration entitled *Ninja Gold*. The plan was originally for Junction Point to make the game while Woo, with his production partner Terrence Chang, would make the movie, the projects converging in both production and plot. Now, however, Fox Atomic has green-lit the movie and the game has been shelved. "It's possible we'll come

"I don't need to direct and I don't want to write it, but I want to make a movie. I want to conceive it; I want to do it"

back to that at some point," Spector assures us. "I hope so because it's a really cool world with cool characters, and certainly the potential for really great gameplay. But now the movie's going ahead without a game and I'm like: 'But I created those characters!' Another baby's going away and I've got to let him go."

The second is something far more unlikely, though given the circumstances inevitable. Spector's mile-long indie streak has come, practically at least, to an end. "It's a tough, weird time," he explains, pragmatically. "If you're making little games, that's fine. If you're in the casual or serious gamespace – even if you're an online guy – there're opportunities out there for independents that I think are pretty cool. But if you want to compete with the BioWares or Pandemics – oh, wait, they're not independent any more. If you want to

compete with the Naughty Dogs – oh, wait... there just aren't a lot of independent developers out there – and there's a reason. No one's going to give you the money and time you need to compete with the internal studios. And everything's cyclical in the videogame business, so right now we're in a cycle where it's just frankly better to be an in-house developer. Three years from now, five years from now, that might change. We'll see."

Prediction, he's always said, is a fool's game, and the reticence about what's to come from Junction Point might well be self-imposed. This partnership with Disney, a kind of mirror image of Steven Spielberg's work with EA's LA studio, is a seminal one: who can possibly know the outcome? His palpable optimism, however, tells you that the kingdom's magic is obviously working.

So we throw one out there, just for the hell of it – some bait for Spector's outspoken grump, buried beneath all this sparkle and shine. Having questioned, with typical candour, the likes of *GTA* at 2005's Montreal Game Summit, what does he think – brace yourself – of *Manhunt 2*? "Aaah, why don't I get myself in trouble just a little bit more?" he sighs, a pause before and after. "It's unnecessary, stupid, pointless, adolescent garbage. But whatever. I think that about a lot of movies, too, but I don't have to see 'em and I don't have to make 'em. And I don't have to play 'em. There is clearly an audience for that and I don't believe games do any damage beyond, you know, generally coarsening the culture along with hyper-violent stupid movies and hyper-violent stupid music."

"The problem is when businesspeople see that thing succeeding and try to push you into doing it. And, to be frank, in the couple of years of independence that Junction Point enjoyed, I saw a lot of that. And I saw it at Ion Storm. I fought every day the beating of 'just-make-a-shooter'. And when you're pitching products and trying to do something that's different and [sighs] more mature, and maybe more intelligent, and all those charged words which are going to get me in trouble, you find the publishers don't want it. And that's another reason to be involved with Disney, because there's *no* pressure to do that. And I'm gonna place my life where I'm working with folks who seem to genuinely believe we make entertainment for everyone. If it ever turns into just kids then I'm not the right guy. But if it's family, I'm your guy right now."





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yourself  
with an  
online  
resume

Blog  
about  
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interests

Organise  
your online  
auctions on  
one website

Use our  
templates to  
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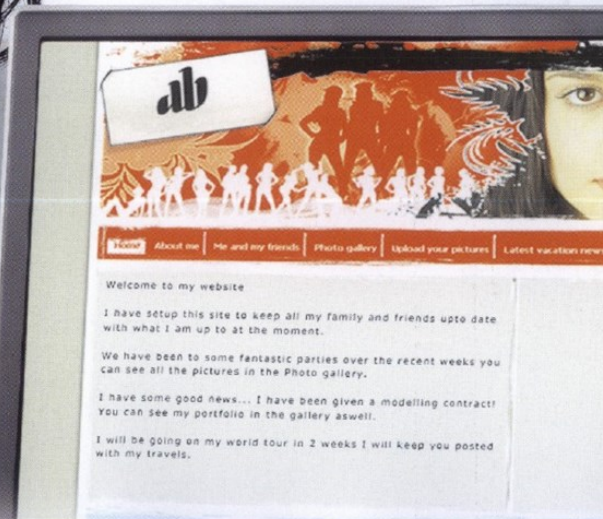
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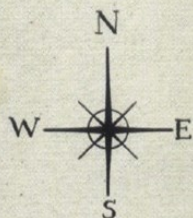
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TOLKIEN BEACH

# ADVENTURELAND

AS THE VIDEOGAME LANDSCAPE CHANGES, IS THE RPG  
BETRAYING ITS TABLETOP ROOTS OR FINDING ITS WAY?







**T**he pen-and-paper roleplaying game was one of the earliest and most enduring influences on videogames. It's not hard to see why: the fundamental problems of playing a role are shared by any game that places you in control of a character – be it a warlock in a kitchen or *Mass Effect's* Commander Shepard. How do you define the relationship between the player and the avatar, and govern a player's desire for freedom? Pen-and-paper (PnP) games are an obvious place to look for answers to these questions – these social and imaginative exercises distinguish themselves from the unruliness of play-acting through structures like inventories, experience and hit-points which fix fantasy with statistical representation. For many years, such mechanisms and the needs of videogames have dovetailed neatly. More than this, they have become such a visible and celebrated part of the roleplaying genre that the term 'RPG' has itself begun to denote these peripheral features to the exclusion of the core idea of 'playing a role'.

This is changing. Looking back over RPGs from the last few years, a trend is evident. *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and, more recently, *Mass Effect* all pursue a more direct, visceral means of representing action, searching for an immediate feedback that circumvents the prominence of PnP mechanics. Increasingly, the RPG is relegating tabletop conventions to the background in favour of the ultimate goal: complete immersion.

Talking to the developers of this new breed of RPG, it's clear that they think that this change in direction is using the medium to better achieve the core act of roleplay itself.

"One of my chief disappointments with many existing RPGs is the amount of pen-and-paper mechanics that they still employ," says **Ed Del Castillo**, the president of Liquid Entertainment, developer of the upcoming *Rise Of The Argonauts*. "Sometimes I feel like the computer is being used as nothing more than a glorified calculator. The player is still micro-manipulating the character's stats, equipment, skills and bonuses. The problem with this is two-fold. First, the player is spending too much time in menus and not as much time in the game world, which dissolves the fiction very quickly. Second, most of the rewards aren't visual; they end up being micro-bonuses which are seen in a menu or paper doll or equipment screen but are



rarely visualised in the game. The Argo team is more focused on 'visual storytelling'. We don't have +3 swords in Argo: we have maces that knock the enemy back, spears that impale him, and swords to cut him in half. We feel that the best rewards are the ones you can see. We're giving the player a fulfilling experience rather than fulfilling the expectations of a genre."

Expectation is the important word: for all the scorn Del Castillo has for these mechanics, they've clung to the computer RPG since its very early days, and their demotion is an acute source of anguish for some vocal minorities. The fans of the two earlier and turn-based *Fallout* games are well known to be rabid detractors of Bethesda Softworks' new visceral take on the franchise. Former Black Isle Studios designer, **Josh Sawyer**, who was at one time the lead on an ill-fated version of *Fallout 3* before the rights were sold on to Bethesda, has been unconditionally critical in saying that the computer RPG was going "straight to hell". As far as Sawyer's definition of singleplayer PC RPGs goes, he might be correct. Black Isle, responsible for many acclaimed RPGs including *Planescape: Torment*, *Icwind Dale* and *Baldur's Gate*, was eventually shut down by parent company Interplay after losing key staff to a splinter group, Troika Studios. With Troika also now defunct, Sawyer clearly feels that the

*Neverwinter Nights* followed in the footsteps of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* by enabling user quest creation. Online, one player could take full control over both the world and server in a role akin to the gamesmaster of PnP



## JOSH SAWYER HAS BEEN UNCONDITIONALLY CRITICAL, SAYING THAT THE COMPUTER RPG WAS GOING "STRAIGHT 'TO HELL"

genre's star has fallen, lamenting in an interview with [rpgcodex.net](http://rpgcodex.net) that "there are no pure PC RPG developers left outside of very small outfits like Spiderweb Software," before adding: "Welcome to hell!"

Behind the fire and brimstone, it's true that the kind of games for which Black Isle became renowned, with its isometric presentation, focus on stat-building and turn-based combat, have given way to a new breed of more instantly

gratifying, console-influenced RPGs. But is sadness at their passing something best relegated to the backwaters of nostalgia? Del Castillo and Sawyer are acknowledging the same shift from different viewpoints: the computer RPG is changing and coming into its own, recognising and embracing its differences from PnP mechanics rather than trying to recreate them in another medium.

**Is there a justification** for this change in direction? The genre's history shows some commonplace truisms to be less than wholly accurate, for while PnP mechanisms may offer videogames easy solutions, the translation between the two worlds has always been imperfect. Despite the common ground, both have been on separate tracks from the offset, and there's even some confusion over whether the games credited with bringing the genre to the digital world were inspired by PnP gaming: the very earliest are contemporaneous with the 1974 release of the seminal tabletop fantasy game, *Dungeons & Dragons*. The prevalence of dungeons and, indeed, dragons in these games might suggest otherwise, but it's surely just as plausible that they were simply riding the



Richard Garriott's *Ultima* series, the first instalment of which was published in 1980, is both one of the earliest commercial RPGs and one of the longest running videogame franchises, with more than 25 titles. Its online versions continue to be very popular







The *Fallout* series has always been known for its compelling world-building and incredibly dark humour. Bethesda Softworks has proved itself competent at the former, but we wait to see if its writing can do justice to *Fallout 3* (below)



The numbered *Ultima* games have so far been divided into three ages, which mimic the sophistication of their narratives. The final Age of Armageddon, of which *Ultima VIII: Pagan* (above) is a part, sees the player do battle against a malign deity known as The Guardian



fantasy milieu's wave of popularity. *Pedit5* by Rusty Rutherford is commonly credited as the first dungeon-crawl game, programmed in 1974, with the banal name merely an attempt to remain undetected by system operators. More explicitly titled games followed: *Dungeon*, *dn* and *Oubliette*, each wearing fantasy inspirations proudly. Running on university-owned systems such as PLATO and the PDP-10 mainframe, these games made use of advancing monitor technology to provide rudimentary graphical representations of the environments, and soon offshoots began to exploit the interconnectivity of academic networks to bring players together. **Richard Bartle**, along with fellow Essex University alumnus Roy Trubshaw, pioneered online gaming with their *Multi User Dungeon (MUD)* – a communal roleplaying space.

"It's not actually as clear-cut as people think to say that MUDs were inspired by PnP games," says Bartle. "Roy Trubshaw hadn't played *Dungeons & Dragons* when he started *MUD*, for example. The [later variant] *DikuMUDs* owed a lot to D&D in that they deliberately replicated many D&D systems, and because *EverQuest* used the *DikuMUD* model, most of today's MMORPGs have many of the same elements. However, *DikuMUDs* were first and foremost MUDs and not computerised versions of D&D. The D&D elements were brought in to

enhance the MUD experience from the point of view of the designers, not to replicate the D&D experience."

So for all of this readiness to adopt the conventions of PnP gaming, it was apparent even this early on that videogames offered something quite different to that of the tabletop game. While videogames do make use of PnP rulesets and the fictions associated with them, they can alter fundamentally in the way they handle player freedom, stories and information. At the same time, the videogame's inefficiencies in reproducing a true tabletop experience have always been mitigated by qualities that the PnP games couldn't have – and it's these qualities on which the new breed of computer RPGs are beginning to concentrate.



*Dnd*, written by Gary Whisenhunt and Ray Wood for the PLATO operating system, had a familiar plot like so many of the early computer RPGs, this one involving a quest for a mystical orb



**"Tabletop games and** videogames scratch two very different itches," says **Paul Chapman**, marketing director at prolific PnP RPG developer Steve Jackson Games. "Tabletop games encourage, and some require, house rules to make the game play smoothly. Tabletop gamers like this; many like to tinker with the rules as much as actually playing the game. Videogames offer more immediate gratification. There are no rules to debate, as they're coded into the game. The visuals are far superior to any board or card game, and there is the added element of action providing instant feedback."

The presence of real people lends the tabletop RPG an invaluable and irreproducible property: the activity is a highly social one. "A good group will play off each other, bend the rules as the mood shifts, and often enjoy each other's company as much, if not more, than the game," says Chapman. "Computer RPGs focus on combat and character advancement, due to the limitations of the technology. You simply can't put an AI into a game which can allow the social interaction that tabletop RPGs do. MMOGs are, of course, the exception to this. By leaving the rules to the computer, basically eliminating the tabletop position of gamesmaster, everyone is a player and can interact socially. This is, in my opinion, as close to tabletop RPGs as today's tech allows us to get. Eventually, as voice and video connectivity improve and become prevalent, this genre will get even closer."

While Chapman is certainly correct in that

MMOGs are currently moving closer to PnP in terms of soliciting the imagination of players, many recent examples are looking to diverge from the mechanical conventions. *Hellgate: London* introduces shooter-style gunplay, *Age Of Conan* intends to give more direct control over melee combat, and *Tabula Rasa* claims to do away with grind. Quite apart from the structure of the games themselves, though, online sandbox RPGs are focusing their energies on much the same things that early MUDs did: environments in which players can construct their own stories. The emergent actions of *World Of Warcraft* players, with their in-game weddings and funerals, is an obvious indicator of this. Crowd Control Productions' *Eve Online* perhaps epitomises the drive, permitting even the most ruthless behaviour between players. **Hilmar Pétursson**, the developer's CEO,

## "VIDEOGAME RPGs OFFER MORE IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION. THERE ARE NO RULES TO DEBATE, AS THEY'RE CODED INTO THE GAME"

believes that, increasingly, PnP gamers are actually abandoning the tabletop for these kinds of freeform digital worlds. He is in a good position to know, since his company recently merged with White Wolf Publishing – a PnP developer with an eminent heritage, responsible for the popular *World of Darkness* roleplay setting.

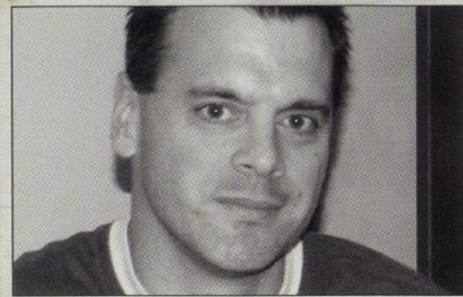


The *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, which is given a Time Extend on page 98, had a more distinctive and idiosyncratic world than its sequel, *Oblivion*, with an art style that departed bravely from the all-too-familiar Tolkien-inspired fantasy mould



"Now that we have networked computer games," says Pétursson, "I think that persistent worlds are approaching a similar level of socialisation as PnP gaming, but without the logistics challenge of 'setting up a game'. A lot of PnP gamers are transitioning over to virtual worlds, more so as those offerings mature in the coming years." No doubt, part of *Eve's* attraction to PnP gamers is in its ability to provide a gamut of play-styles that goes some way to replicating the idea of 'house rules'.

"You can very much play the stats aspect of *Eve Online* or you can sit inside a station all day, trade on the market and not bother with stats at all," says Pétursson. "Or you can build a corporation with a unique vision and mission and lead your employees to victory. There are also great examples of dedicated roleplaying groups in *Eve* that really immerse themselves in the backstory of the world and build on it. Singleplayer games are, due to their constraints, stuck with what the designer emphasised in the design. With its sandbox-oriented design principles *Eve Online* really leaves that balance



Pete Hines, VP of marketing at Bethesda Softworks, sees the strength of computer RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls* laying in their immersive worlds



The world of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* still occasionally tempts members of the Edge team – but we resist, if only because we know that a single play session can easily expand into an abyss capable of consuming days on end

## ADVANCE WARS

While *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* tried to naturalise character advancement, canny players were able to exploit the system by selecting skills they wouldn't use as their major choices – allowing them to become disproportionately powerful at a given level.

"We do the best we can to balance and account for that, but at the same time we don't obsess over it," says Hines. "It's a singleplayer game. So you play the game and enjoy it however you want. If you want to create a character with the lowest possible major skills so you can level-up more times before you max out – be our guest. Our goal is to provide an entertaining roleplaying game. We aren't that interested in telling you how to play. Part of the fun is you deciding to try things or go out and explore just to see what happens."



*Fallout 3* looks to be a more concentrated experience than *Oblivion*, giving Bethesda the ability to more closely craft its world and give character to its varied population

to the player." That human element is also key in establishing player freedom in a manner that the singleplayer RPG cannot replicate: there's a flexibility with a gamesmaster that simply can't be pre-programmed.

"Without a major technology breakthrough, making a videogame as freeform as a PnP game is impossible," says Chapman. "Take *Oblivion*, for instance. After questing for the Mages' Guild, I'll eventually want to become the leader. Fine, that can be programmed into the quests. But then, what if I want to cast an illusion and become the king? Or research new spells that allow me to fly? In tabletop RPGs, if a character wants to steal a horse, then kill it and use the meat as a distraction so wolves won't chase him, the gamesmaster can resolve the plan simply and easily. In videogames, anticipating that kind of out-of-the-box thinking would require hundreds of man-hours, and wouldn't be cost-effective."

It's not simply a case of videogames inadequately approximating the freedom inherent in PnP gaming and aimed for in MMOGs – it's more that they have the exact opposite relationship with freedom. The PnP game adopts rules to chaperone the imagination of its players, whereas the videogame has inherent restrictions that it is trying to exceed. The fact that the latter is a more rigidly structured experience is a double-edged sword, however – while it cannot account for the range of player action possible in a PnP



The main quest in *Oblivion* was far less interesting than many of the side-quests, a particular highlight being The Dark Brotherhood assassination section





game, it is possible to create a more tailored and immersive experience. It is towards this end that we see recent videogames eroding the visibility of their mechanics, hiding hit points and other statistics behind more streamlined graphical representations in an effort to achieve greater player immersion.

Player freedom and the idea of immersion are issues of which Bethesda Software, the developer of *Oblivion* and *Fallout 3*, is acutely aware. "It's obviously something that's had a big impact on us and the way we've approached our games," says Bethesda's vice president of marketing, **Pete Hines**. "Let the player create the character they want and go out and make their own choices. Go where you want, do what you want. You decide how to deal with problems and what to do next. But in a videogame it is at least somewhat important that you do not allow the player to break the game, either intentionally or unintentionally. So I don't know how much we can do away with the rules, but we do the best to bend and stretch them as far as possible to allow people the most freedom possible. I don't know how far we can stretch that freedom, but I assure you we plan to find out."

Hines suggests that much of what can make videogaming a transparent, believable experience is predicated on enabling a purer and more direct kind of roleplay, eschewing immersion-breaking mechanics like turn-based combat, and dependence on stat screens. But removing the abstraction of PnP introduces new challenges: since they rely on visual representation rather than imagination, videogames have to reconcile the disparity between a player's desired action and his avatar's capabilities in a way that is clear and avoids frustration.

"PnP games are about being limited by what your character can do," explains Hines. "You make choices, but what usually ends up determining your success or failure is your character and a roll of the dice. That's a tougher thing to balance in a videogame as we try to



Eve's player base is already two-thirds the size of Iceland's population, and growing in sporadic exponential bursts – quite a departure from form: most MMOGs plateau after an initial boom

walk the line between having the player meaningfully interact with the world around you, and having the skills and abilities of your character determine your success or failure. We've already talked about this a bit with *Fallout 3*, where we want the condition of the weapon you are using, and your character's skill with using that weapon, to determine whether or not you can kill that creature over there – not

happened, unlike in a game where you may say: 'Wait, my sword passed right through him', or: 'He was right in my crosshairs, why did I miss?' I think we did a pretty good job of it in *Oblivion* where the player has control over what's happening, but ultimately your character, and his or her equipment, abilities, etc, determines whether you succeed or fail."

Ultimately, it raises the question of how the

## "I THINK TECHNOLOGY HAS EXPANDED WHAT WE CAN DO IN TERMS OF ROLEPLAY, NOT LIMITED IT. IT BRINGS THINGS TO LIFE"

your ability to put crosshairs on a target and pull the trigger.

"Because you're manipulating this avatar within a videogame, there's a layer of feedback that has to be provided to the player, visually, that you don't have to deal with in a PnP. You attack, roll dice; if you get a good roll you hit. If not, you miss. It's pretty cut and dry. You may curse the roll but there's no questioning what

medium best serves the purpose of roleplay. "I think technology has expanded what we can do in terms of roleplay, not limited it," counters Hines. "It takes things that were done in abstraction and brings them to life vividly. We've gone from NPCs in roleplaying that stand around and provide info like talking kiosks to characters that move around the world, interact with each other, and so on. The more horsepower you have to spend on things like AI, or physics, or animations, the more believable the whole experience will be. I think most of us were looking for something in PnP that really grabbed us and pulled us in to a world we wanted to be a part of – an experience we could get lost in. I think videogames continue to make strides toward that goal."

Bethesda's own *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* arguably stands as the high-water mark for this blend of roleplaying and responsive visualisation. Its minimisation of interface and choice of firstperson view is entirely geared toward delivering information to the player intuitively, rather than by reams of statistics. Even the way you advance your character is a natural extension of playing a role. "It rewards you for using your skills, rather than giving out experience points," says Hines. "So we like for



Crowd Control Productions' Hilmar Pétursson (right) was one of the most entertaining speakers at last year's Edinburgh Interactive Festival, where he claimed that by the end of 2008, Eve-related products would make up half of all Iceland's annual exports





## FREE RANGE ROGUES

Richard Bartle suggests that the flexibility of multiplayer RPGs has constricted in the intervening years between the genre's early exponents and blockbuster MMOGs like *WOW*. "All the early virtual worlds had great freedom," he says. "They had so much freedom that today's players wouldn't be able to cope with it. This is because with freedom comes responsibility, and today's players don't seem to want that. They're happy to boss each other around, but give them permadeath and ask them to put up or shut up and they don't like it one little bit. It no longer fits in with what they feel they want from a virtual world, which is fair enough, but it means people don't have to be as responsible for their own actions as they were in the early days. This means the freedom is gone too, because the world is programmed to restrict some actions that might once have been valid."

*Rise Of The Argonauts* well demonstrates the genre's divergence from the world of PnP. As Liquid Entertainment's Ed Del Castillo says: "It's interesting to see how the theatre of the mind differs from the theatre of the screen"



the player to simply get better at doing whatever it is they do. We don't need to beat them over the head with stats."

It's a design philosophy that Del Castillo agrees with: "By burying the spreadsheets, inventory screens and paper dolls a little we can bring the story, the world and the characters into the foreground. If we hide the dice rolling and replace the micro-bonuses with things players can see and feel the experience will only get better. I admit that's it's a different game than some RPGers are used to, but ask yourself, would you rather spend the next 15 minutes moving through a sunken forest, killing foul creatures and discovering ancient ruins, or moving around equipment so that you can fit the bow you just picked up into your backpack? Either way, there's a game for you."

**The RPG is** increasingly becoming a paradox – more progressive in its mechanics, and ever more pure in its attempts to make the role you play a persuasive, transparent experience. Although there is justifiable nostalgia for games like *Fallout*, *Planescape: Torment* and their predecessors, persisting in the use of tabletop gaming mechanics is in some ways a backwards perspective. Alongside gaming's infatuation with cinema, the reliance on tabletop mechanics is the result of a fledgling medium attempting to ground itself within the familiar. Such structures are used in the PnP world to lend solidity to what can otherwise be difficult to grasp, difficult to control. The digital medium has other problems, but a lack of restriction is rarely one of them.

"When I played PnP games, the best experiences were unforgettable stories and character interactions and really epic and cool



experiences," Del Castillo says. "In contrast, the worst PnP games I was a part of felt like... open the door, kill what's inside, gather loot, move on to the next door. These were awful, but what's even more awful is that many computer RPGs have nothing more to offer than just that. That's just a lack of ingenuity. They're relying too heavily on the work that's already been done for them and not thinking enough about what more a computer can do. We in the videogame industry are tasked with making the experience more immediate and more visual, which hopefully makes things more exciting. *Argo* hopefully represents the next generation of the RPG, the 'adventure experience'."

Increasingly, the dependence upon statistics and other abstracted means of representation is becoming an albatross, insofar as singleplayer videogames are concerned – strangely so, for a medium whose strengths are in direct interactivity and immediate visual feedback. In fact, games that make the best of these qualities have a better chance of truly fulfilling the only important goal of those tabletop games: the ability to imagine yourself in another's shoes – the freedom to choose a role.









# UNsung STAR

Miyamoto might be the world's most famous game designer, but Yoshiaki Koizumi is one of Nintendo's brightest lights

**L**ink's Awakening, Super Mario 64, Ocarina Of Time, Majora's Mask, Super Mario Sunshine and Super Mario Galaxy: what's the first name to pop into your head? It's almost impossible not to think of Shigeru Miyamoto, but it's hard to conceive any other name to attach to such a remarkable series of titles. Yet a man called **Yoshiaki Koizumi** has quietly toiled on each one of them, most recently as game director for *Super Mario Galaxy*.

In fact, it's amazing to consider the influence he's had on some of the best games ever made, even from his very beginnings at Nintendo, 16 years ago. "Before I worked as a game director I worked as a script writer on *Link's Awakening*," says Koizumi. "In that game I was responsible for the entire story. So the entire idea of the island in a dream, the interactions with the villagers and the boss behaviours were all my concepts. I've continued to do that kind of work on following games even though my title

is director. On *Majora's Mask*, for example, I wrote a lot of the events that you have with the villagers, and with *Super Mario Galaxy* I was heavily involved in the creation of the story."

But it's not that Koizumi has demanded that he have his input at Nintendo recognised as comparable to Miyamoto's. He's nervously twitchy in an interview situation, and it's not until he begins to talk about his experience of working with Miyamoto that he begins to relax, and indeed it's to Miyamoto that he attributes the quality of the titles. "Mr Miyamoto is known for taking lots of time to create the best player experience. His demands are numerous and exacting, but I actually really like that. He's effortless in explaining what he wants," Koizumi explains, recounting a moment during the development of *Super Mario 64* where Miyamoto excitedly tried to describe how he felt Mario should swim – by swimming around his office. "I began swimming around with



# A GALAXY OF HITS

Since beginning at Nintendo in the early '90s, Koizumi has helped to shape some of its biggest games...

## The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past (1991)

Koizumi's first project at Nintendo, his role in game development was to write the manual – in the process contributing to the backstory of one of Nintendo's most cherished series.

## The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening (1993)

The game Koizumi considers his first 'real' project. He was (as with *A Link To The Past*) originally intended to write the manual, but ended up taking a much more active role in its development.

## Super Mario 64 (1996)

Taking the role of assistant game director, Koizumi was heavily involved in developing *Super Mario 64*'s groundbreaking camera. "Thinking about the camera is game design too," he notes. He worked to avoid the problems which had plagued 3D worlds: depth misperception, motion sickness and disorientation.

## The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998)

Again assistant game director, Koizumi's work on the camera continued, helping develop the famous 'Z-lock' copied by countless imitators since. "It's hard to use a sword unless you can judge distance and direction," he explains.

## The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask (2000)

Koizumi says, "We tried to make *Zelda 64* a movie you could touch, with rhythms such as animals which only came out at night, and so on," and this concept was fleshed out in the dark cyclic tale of *Majora's Mask*. "The wedding at the end was touching, though, huh?" he jokes.

## Super Mario Sunshine (2002)

Now game director, Koizumi explains *Super Mario Sunshine* as "a town bathed in sunshine surrounded by clear water. We tried to create a big water park island that made you feel like you were on vacation." But frustrations with the camera led to the development of...

## Super Mario Galaxy (2007)

"The period between *Super Mario 64* and *Super Mario Galaxy* was like the journey in a long road movie: sometimes fun, sometimes hard," says Koizumi. "But don't get the impression that the journey is over. There's a long way to go yet!"





The SNES's *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past* (above) was Koizumi's first project for Nintendo, but *Link's Awakening* (right), for the original Game Boy, was the first in which he considers he took a significant role

him," Koizumi laughs. "We get along well together, and time flies by when we're working. Before we know it, sometimes, it's 2am."

Even-handed in his praise, it's not only Miyamoto whom Koizumi feels is important to Nintendo's game development. "I don't only work with Miyamoto," he points out. "As a whole, Nintendo tends to place the customer first. We all spend a lot of time thinking about how players will react to things and trying to cater to them."

Indeed, Koizumi's influence is focused on player experience. "In all of the games I've worked on, I'd say I spent most of my time working on the player character," Koizumi says, but he can't help but note Miyamoto's role once again. "Miyamoto has taught me that if the player does not feel right, this can affect the whole game. The more things a player can do, the more possibilities are available for the game. A great example is *Super Mario Bros.* What if Mario couldn't jump? Even the lowliest Goomba would be unstoppable. But when he can jump, breaking blocks and stomping enemies becomes possible. So several new possibilities can open up from only one new ability. But of course, complexity can become higher. At Nintendo we call it 'player-based design'. It's all about the balance between fun and complexity."

Clearly, this balance is finely nuanced: "If you think about games only as a thing that you interact with, you're missing the possibility of immersion. The inspirations that I tend to draw on for that all come from real life itself. Hiking on a mountain and seeing



Miyamoto excitedly tried to describe how he felt Mario should swim – by swimming around his office. "I began swimming around with him," laughs Koizumi

a cave and thinking about what's inside – it's that sense of wonder and excitement I want players to feel."

**It's the joint** importance of surprise and ease of use in the player experience that Koizumi considers the core of his development philosophy: "I think of the two as a set. For example, if you're designing a world, you have to give both to the player. You can create a world in which when they turn a corner they are amazed at a vista, something that would surprise them, but at the same time the world can't confuse them, or get them lost. Any time that you're trying to surprise them or do something hard or difficult in the environment, you also have to balance that with ease of play."

Koizumi likes to ensure that the aspects of 'ease of play' thematically fit the projects that he's working on. "If you want to stop players getting lost, you could include a map, but in *Mario* games, one of the most important things is tempo," he explains. "In the early *Mario* games the levels were laid out so you'd achieve a kind of rhythm if you kept running. And we never want to break that rhythm by making someone pause to pull up a map." But it's different for *Zelda*. "*Legend Of*

*Zelda* games are all about anticipation," he says. "You think about what's coming next. Each room ahead of you holds a different kind of challenge and sometimes you can even imagine what it might be, based on the shape of the room if you can look at it on a map. Maps just aren't appropriate for *Mario*, but they're very appropriate for *Zelda*."

Koizumi also headed the group that created *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat*, one of the GameCube's most idiosyncratic, if overlooked, games, which had rhythm at its heart. Its 2D perspective was a product of a period in which he questioned the nature of 3D games. "After working on titles such as *Super Mario Sunshine* I began to wonder if it was possible to continue to implement the themes of surprise and ease of play with the increasing complexity of camera controls. Until I could find a solution I decided to close off the idea of any future *Mario* games. I changed my base of operations to EAD Tokyo [Nintendo's Entertainment and Analysis Division] and we decided to make a 2D action game using the bongos as the controller."

Although it might seem divergent, the project resulted in many design



Koizumi doesn't work in Nintendo's Kyoto headquarters; rather, he and his team are based in the studio known as Entertainment Analysis and Development Toyko, established to create *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat*





ideas were expressed in *Super Mario Galaxy*: "For example, when you're moving quickly through a stage, the tempo of the music will change to match your pace. This is a musical effect matched to the user experience. Every single time you play it might feel slightly different." But more than just the music of *Super Mario Galaxy* benefited from his work on *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat*. "Jungle Beat was a remarkable game – even just watching someone play it was fun," Koizumi beams. "And I learned that the whole family had to be able to enjoy *Super Mario Galaxy*. I see our games being played in the living room on the big TV, not alone in the bedroom." Co-Star mode, in which one player controls Mario and another a pointer that can interact with Mario's surroundings, was the result – one part of *Super Mario Galaxy* that Koizumi is especially proud of.

**Perhaps the most** remarkable aspect of *Super Mario Galaxy* – running around its spherical planetoids – didn't come from *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat*, but is an offshoot of the same discomfort with the 3D camera that inspired it. "We didn't do it just because they were visually novel," Kozumi notes. "No matter how large you make a playing field, players will reach the end and have to turn around. And the camera will have to turn around, too, increasing the chance the player will get disorientated. The best thing about spherical worlds is the unity of connected surface, which lets you run around forever. It's hard to get lost and players don't have to control the camera! We gained more than just a spherical playfield – we removed the need to move the camera and solved our problem of too-difficult controls."

Did they know while they were creating *Super Mario Galaxy* that they were creating something so groundbreaking? "Whenever we make a game and approach a new element and begin to flesh it out, we always think: 'Oh, this is totally new!' and that excitement builds as we layer all of our new elements together," Koizumi begins. "The real difficult part comes when you've pulled a lot of new elements together and you actually have to see how the game plays. But I try to stay on that track where I always feel like I'm doing something new."

Koizumi remains coy about what he will work on next. He evidently enjoyed working on *Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat*. "A sequel, you mean?" he asks. "Oh, I can't really talk about that..." But it seems unlikely that he will do anything other than continue to work on games that boldly shape new principles for such fundamentals as player experience, interface and the 3D camera. But now, perhaps, a little less quietly.



From *Super Mario 64*'s camera (top) to *Ocarina of Time*'s groundbreaking Z-lock targeting system (centre left); the touching and interwoven stories of Clock Town in *Majora's Mask* (centre right) to *Donkey Kong Jungle Beat*'s stripped-down controls (above), many of the touches that define the magic of Nintendo's games are down to Koizumi's careful attitude to interface and detail







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# Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

## Edge's most played

### Halo 3



There's nothing like new maps to get the trigger finger itching for n00bs. And, despite what appearances might suggest, it's a good place to build up team skills. 360, MICROSOFT

### Ultimate Ghosts 'N Goblins



We're falling in love with the PSP's screen all over again with levels designed around 16:9 and a graphical style which seems to take into account all that smearing. PSP, CAPCOM

### Mass Effect



As one Edge friend has said: "Mass Effect is the absolute best supremely flawed game of the year." You play it and play it even after it breaks its own promises. 360, MICROSOFT

## Expect the unexpected

Can juggling genres meet gamers' expectations?



Developers that mix their genres face a tricky question: do you clearly describe your game and limit it to a niche, or do you package it as something more popular, as *The Club* (left) has done, and risk disappointing buyers?

Just as *Burnout Paradise's* open world distances itself from the rigid structure of a regular racing game, so *The Club* moves in the opposite direction – taking the shooter and hammering it into a shape with as much in common with *Space Giraffe* and *PGR* as it has with *Gears Of War*. This kind of genre playfulness is no doubt a good thing – *Paradise's* radical move enlivens a franchise that would struggle to better itself by serving up more of the same. But both titles face a struggle when trying to clearly convey their offering to consumers. Exactly how do you succinctly pitch a game as hybrid as *The Club*? Apparently by making it look like something it's not, a regular thirdperson shooter, fitted with steroidal stereotypes and dour environments.

In the case of *Paradise*, fans of the series accustomed to instant restarts have already voiced their irritation that the game no longer allows this – this latest instalment strips out the abstracted event selection in favour of an open world, meaning that a race ends wherever the finish line is, and the only way of getting back to the start is to drive there. It's a change that fundamentally alters the

experience of the game – no longer is it the kind of thing you can throw into the console simply to play one of its momentary, self-enclosed challenges. It now offers a deeper world of prolonged distraction as you end up taking detours – and then detours from your detours. In evolving, however, the series risks distancing itself from its fans, and its branding works against its innovations to some extent – nostalgia will prevent many from evaluating the game on its own merits, preferring the safety of narrow expectations.

Of course, if any title is destined to be misunderstood this month, then it's *No More Heroes*. Its dalliance with a GTA-style urban space is designed to underscore the banality of your interaction with that world – a satire that will fall flat with anyone who comes to the game anticipating a city as vibrant as those in the games it sends up or superficially resembles. But for all that these titles risk being left on the shop shelves, you only have to look at the likes of *Soldier Of Fortune*, a game that wearily fulfils its genre remit in the most insipid of ways, to see how valuable it is that games can occasionally upset expectations entirely.



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**Burnout Paradise**  
360, PS3



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**The Club**  
360, PC, PS3

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**No More Heroes**  
Wii

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**Geometry Wars Galaxies**  
DS, Wii

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**Nights: Journey Of Dreams**  
Wii

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**R-Type Tactics**  
PSP

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**Universe At War**  
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**Pain**  
PS3



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**Speedball 2 Tournament**  
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**Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow**  
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**Soldier Of Fortune: Payback**  
360, PC, PS3

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**Soul Calibur Legends**  
Wii

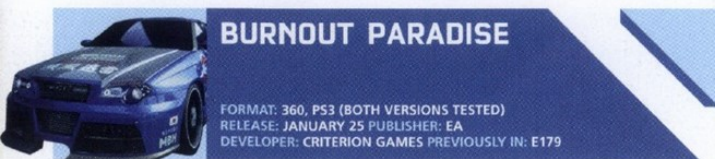


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**Dragoneer's Aria**  
PSP

Edge's scoring system explained:  
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,  
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,  
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten





## BURNOUT PARADISE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (BOTH VERSIONS TESTED)  
RELEASE: JANUARY 25 PUBLISHER: EA  
DEVELOPER: CRITERION GAMES PREVIOUSLY IN: E179



Paradise finally claims the soundtrack no-brainer award for being the first game since *Road Rash* to include Soundgarden's Rusty Cage. In addition to 39 other licensed tracks, it also boasts every in-house track from the first three *Burnout* games, for those who like their Dad-rock to be especially wrinkly

If 'web 2.0' describes a watershed for online communication, where language and rules are innately understood, friendship is just a button-press away and society is everywhere, then *Burnout Paradise* is every bit a 'multiplayer 2.0' game. Its knowledge of how people function both online and off, competitively and casually, is unparalleled, its movement between those states of play almost seamless. Never have reckless endeavour and superior craft – the yin and yang of Criterion games – collided to such marvellous effect.

For a studio that operates at 100 miles per hour, it's been an uncommonly expensive, time-consuming effort. But the result, a free-roaming mix of hub and racetrack called Paradise City, accounts for every hour and penny. That stop-start rotation of frontend and game, almost comically damaging to the second game, has been replaced by a rolling *Burnout* experience that starts when you pick up the pad and doesn't stop until, after dozens of crashes, record attempts and challenges, you put it down.

Each of its 120 junctions offers an event, accepted by slowing down and jamming

By some marvel of design and engineering, whichever path you take still leads inescapably to the *Burnout* experience



Console fanboys will have plenty to argue over, each version having its own advantages. The PS3 version looks better, while the 360 has custom soundtrack support. Online support is universally terrific, though



Mugshots and 'smugshots' are a great idea, snapping the smirk and grimace of a Takedown scorer and their victim. These then accompany rivalry records in your profile

both the brake and the accelerator. Some are classics like *Race or Road Rage*, others are new, like the Kudos-style *Stunt Run* and *Marked Man*, a point-to-point pursuit. Crash mode has been slipstreamed into the action as *Showtime*, which turns you into a bouncing bomb whenever and wherever you like, keeping score for as long as the chaos ensues. Punch the D-pad and up to eight other players can join you on the map, ready to face over 300 co-op challenges, from daredevil stunt displays to skill-based trials and party games. Few are forcibly combative, the battle racing given its own set of options, inviting you to draw your own routes on the map.

*Paradise*, in this sense, is as much about a lack of bad as an embarrassment of good. Criterion has injected hearty doses of *Need For Speed: Most Wanted*, *Test Drive Unlimited* and *Midtown Madness 3*, creating a build-your-own *Burnout* which simply wipes away all previous complaints. If you don't like what lurks around one particular corner, you just drive along to the next and score some leisurely points en route. Or succumb to the always-on distractions of its online modes, the desire to explore over 250 miles of road, or the street-specific leaderboards which recognise all of the *Burnout* disciplines.

The grid-based road layout, which expands into open, sinuous roadways as you leave the urban centre, always threatens to baffle *Burnout* traditionalists. It adds to the usual twitch-dodging and drifting a much trickier need for route-finding, where a missed junction can just as easily prove a successful fluke as a fatal mistake. Only after hours of exploration do you gain insight into

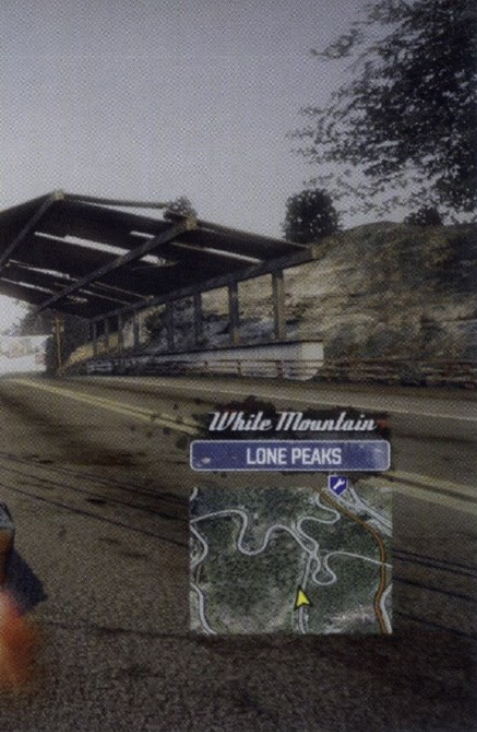


which is which, and there's no instant restart, just a long drive back or a more local alternative. But because this is a game built to last – and importantly built upon many of *Burnout's* existing routes – that mental map does come eventually. And if you still don't fancy the life of a battle-racing taxi driver, online races can be made as linear and straightforward as you like.

By some marvel of design and engineering, whichever path you take still leads inescapably to the *Burnout* experience – that of fixing your eye on the vanishing point and hurling your car through regiments of oncoming traffic toward it. Barrel-roll from a bridge, skim an overpass, ricochet off a mountainside and land into a blind U-turn and the same scene awaits: traffic, the distant horizon, and the challenge of reaching one despite the other.

What's gone is the punk attitude that





whipped you through *Takedown* and *Revenge*, as if suffering a brain haemorrhage on the finish line was the sole aspiration of the *Burnout* elite. *Paradise* is more passive and assured, its stance personified by the mild-mannered, almost-likeable DJ Atomika. The game still likes to press your buttons but does so imperceptibly, which really pays off in the recreational Freeburn mode. This online party mode, in which one player picks the challenges and everyone works together on the achievements, is so disarming that even strangers feel like friends. And if that's not an epic breakthrough in online play, what is?

Few problems ever really trouble *Paradise*, most being mere questions of taste, the most divisive of which is that lack of instant restarts. Some will love the perpetual distractions and dismissal of all that medal-chasing, others are sure to disagree. Also,



Each new car appears initially as an AI-controlled hothead, charging around Paradise City. One Takedown later and it's in your junkyard, ready to be picked up and battered into shape by a repair shop. As usual, the vehicles cover a wide range from trucks to supercars



*Paradise* is full of what you might call discoverables rather than collectibles – points of interest that are recorded on your profile. It's a needless endeavour, as the myriad short-cuts, drive-throughs and destructible billboards are all key parts of the game itself, and you'd use them anyway. Still, it's something for the Achievement junkie in all 360 owners

because nothing is incongruous in *Paradise* City, there are no excursions to the more exotic corners of previous games, like *Eastern Bay* or *Eternal City*. Neither are there ethereal mists around Crystal Summit or sudden shifts in weather or into night-time. Where *Revenge* moved tantalisingly close to the radiance of *OutRun* and *Ridge Racer*, this game retreats to somewhere nearer to *Most Wanted's* Rockport. And in singleplayer, where the customisation options are comparatively weak, there's practically

no indication (or emulation) of the game's online splendour.

None of it matters. When Criterion dares, everyone wins, and this is its most courageous game to date. Rather than power its way towards a brick wall, favouring intensity over diversity, *Paradise* loops its action into an endless rush, the possibilities, for arcade racing and battle enthusiasts alike, increasing with every hour. It's hard not to see it as the birth of a new era, but in truth it might be the last *Burnout* you ever need. [9]

Vehicles are now classified by discipline as well as their type, stunt cars able to use boost whenever it's acquired, speed cars inheriting the all-or-nothing gauge from earlier games

## Smash TV



Crashes in *Burnout Paradise* are the best they've ever been, so sophisticated now as to dwell solely on the point of impact. Momentum tangibly backfires through wheels, chassis and glass, crumpling doorframes, squashing bonnets and sending windscreens across the street. And there is, finally, a very real weight to the 75 vehicles, causing most to rock on to broken springs when the damage is done. Completing the effect is a new range of camera techniques, most inherited from Michael Bay, including specific kinds of shake and blur. The ambitious replay-sharing of *Burnout Revenge* 360 is absent, no doubt for good technical reasons. That said, it's not like anyone really used it anyway.





## THE CLUB

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: FEBRUARY 8 PUBLISHER: SEGA  
DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS PREVIOUSLY IN: E164, E175, E183



These 'skullshots', dotted around levels, are the key to getting the highest scores. When blown apart they instantly refill your multiplier bar, giving you more time to find your next kill before you lose the bonus points



Context-sensitive actions are infuriatingly sluggish. At the end of each level you must smash through the exit – which takes just enough time to reduce your multipliers



**B**est described as a lightgun game with full motion control, *The Club* is indeed a somewhat bizarre creation; it's a score-attack version of *The Running Man*, structured like a racer and outfitted with *Manhunt*'s grim, contemporary aesthetic. In fact, this last aspect may well be to the game's detriment – aside from being fairly lacking in charisma, the gritty, urban environments and bland roster of grizzled stereotypes fit the mould of a more conventional shooter. The decision not to go for a braver, more abstract design can only hurt the game in the long run, when consumers are disappointed that it's not *Call Of Duty 4*.

The distance between these titles is well summarised by Bizarre Creations' own description of *The Club* as a racing game in which each enemy combatant is a corner. For

Just as with PGR's idea of bestowing 'kudos' for adroit driving, *The Club* gives you points for killing enemies in more skilful ways



the most part this comparison holds up. The series of tournaments, grouped by location, are divided up into a number of single events, each of which plots a different route through the same environment. Just as with PGR's idea of bestowing 'kudos' for adroit driving, *The Club* gives you points for killing the enemies that populate each course in more skilful ways. Each kill fills up a multiplier bar which rapidly ticks down, meaning you

have to keep a steady flow of kills in order to build the multipliers and achieve the biggest scores. While the combat itself isn't particularly thrilling in itself, Bizarre Creations has tapped into an exciting tension here, and the game modes which introduce a time element manipulate this expertly – forcing the player to balance finishing the course quickly and squeezing as many points out of your enemies' broken bodies as possible.

Learning the winding courses of *The Club* presents a greater initial challenge than in the average racer, however, where the correct direction tends to be 'forward'. Aside from being aesthetically disappointing, the art style's preoccupation with crumbling dereliction is also at odds with the need for clear pathing. While the events require you to follow a single linear route, popping enemies in the head along the way, the environments are designed to appear entirely non-linear, and the signposting is not always obvious and occasionally actively misleading. Compounding this initial confusion is the fact that, like a racer, the tournament structure





The enemies with riot shields are among the trickiest to dispatch in the game, protected as they are from the front. Occasionally you can coax them into crossfire, but the most surefire way of killing them is to shoot them in their feet



The character designs in the game are at best tediously predictable and at worst dubious stereotypes. The only exception to this is a madman named Nemo (above), who is apparently some kind of evil fisherman



The mixture of flat lighting, cluttered level design and poor signposting can mean you end up in culs-de-sac which kill your multiplier or, in time-sensitive game modes, can occasionally lead to your own death



The different characters demand fairly different play-styles. Kuro is fast but can't take a lot of damage; his speed makes him difficult to hit, but is irrelevant in tight spaces

locks you into a series of events at which you will inevitably do poorly if you aren't already well versed in the tracks' layout. Although each individual event allows you a number of retries if you get killed outright, this rarely happens on the difficulty setting for 'semi-experienced' players; you are more likely to finish with an underwhelming score and thus fail the tournament as a whole.

It takes a little bit of readjustment of the shooter mindset to realise that this is where the easiest difficulty setting comes in, fulfilling the role of a training lap. On this setting it's almost impossible to fail; not only are the enemies fewer and less well-equipped, but you would be unlucky not to finish each event with a score that is larger than your nearest competitor by a factor of ten. On higher difficulty settings simply finishing isn't enough – you have to really work to achieve the high multipliers in order to maintain your position in the top three.

With only eight tournaments, with six or seven events in each, the game relies fairly heavily on the attraction of replaying as different characters – and there is enough variation among them to demand substantially different approaches, from the slow but tough Dragov to the speedy but fragile Kuro. However, Bizarre Creations perhaps overestimates the appeal of replay by supplying eight possible characters. Can they each be sufficiently interesting? The various settings – a prison, a warehouse, a steel mill – are all so unvaryingly drab that they do not, in themselves, spark any kind of lasting appeal. Even in the wellspring of artistic potential that is Venice, play is relegated to the grubby backstreets.

This said, there is a continuing satisfaction in the precision that comes with multiple playthroughs. Of course, the kind of steady, repeatable command you eventually have of each course is derived at the expense of a

more dynamic combat system. While your character can do a slow and entirely ineffective combat roll, you are otherwise fairly immobile, restricted to pacing around with a *Gears Of War*-style view – but lacking that game's cover options. You can't help but feel that perhaps the game's presentation as a gritty shooter creates expectations for its combat system that run contrary to the game's actual mechanics: underneath the mundane masculinity and grimy gun-toting clichés lies a heavily structured and well-considered score-attack game – one that's worth excavating for all the short-lived interest it holds.

[7]

Tick, tick, tick... BOOM



The most complex of the singleplayer game-types is the Time Attack mode, which requires you to run laps around a circuit under the clock. Should the timer expire, you die instantly, but every kill you make adds vital seconds. Not only is there a tense interplay between careful skill-kills and the ticking clock, but on the harder difficulties health doesn't respawn between laps, so you also need to consider when you use it with some care.





## NO MORE HEROES

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN)  
FEBRUARY (US) TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: RISING STAR GAMES  
DEVELOPER: GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE  
PREVIOUSLY IN: E171, E182



Boss encounters rarely disappoint, each having excellent dialogue before the battle that shows the kind of offbeat and innovative touches that GHM has learned from *Metal Gear Solid's* example

**W**hen you load up *No More Heroes*, Grasshopper's logo appears on the screen bearing the legend 'Punk's Not Dead!' It's a comic moment – slightly desperate in its insistence, slightly banal in its sentiment – and wholly suited to *No More Heroes*, a game that reconciles rebellion and beam swords with a matter-of-fact take on the realities of life. It's a singular vision, the script joking about emotions and toilets in the same breath, its tasks veering between insanity and mundanity: its greatest achievement is the melding of these diverse

The bosses are a wonderful collection of freaks, with a level of invention that has more than a hint of *Metal Gear Solid*



The bike initially seems restricted in its movements, and a little bit of a pain. But once its quirks have been worked out, it's an invaluable transport around *NMH's* world, and its little hidden moves and tricks prove good fun. As the story progresses, it becomes useful in ways beyond mere transportation

qualities into something coherent. This is the game that Suda 51 and GHM have always threatened, but never quite delivered.

It begins with Travis Touchdown coming across a beam sword and killing a local assassin at the request of a pretty girl he desperately wants to impress, which sets him on the road to encounters with another 11 killers. The game is built around these 11 assignments, between each of which Travis can traverse a hub town on his motorbike, seek gainful employment or take on freelance assassination missions. The world, and its characters, are skewed parodies that



Although the environments are probably the least inspired part of *NMH's* aesthetic, they do offer their own flourishes – and the rest of the time, the abundance of other details keeps your interest alive



There are a good number of freelance assassination missions that can be undertaken to earn extra cash, and at the later stages it's a breeze to decimate ranks of weak foes with your powered-up beam katana – the real trick is to tempt them into bunching together, so your mightiest strikes kill several

balance gaming functions with homely advice and bizarre voice-acting. The cardboard town is basic to say the least, and will be misconstrued as an attempt at *GTA*, but it's a much less ambitious and compact space that concentrates on the minutiae of Travis's life: thus, the only things of interest to him and the player are the bars, clothes shops, the odd friend, perhaps the gym, and the Job Centre.

There is one key surprise within this part of *No More Heroes*: though it's full of events and distractions, it also dares to try to bore you. The jobs depend on your learning the technique for each before doing as much as you can, and make a virtue of their real-world mundanity with ridiculous 8bit fonts proudly trumpeting that you are a 'Coconut Collector' or 'Lawn Mower', while the boss stands around with his arms folded and watches "the third-class man" sweat. At three minutes long, there's the suspicion that Grasshopper has timed exactly how long is too long for repetitive tasks, and

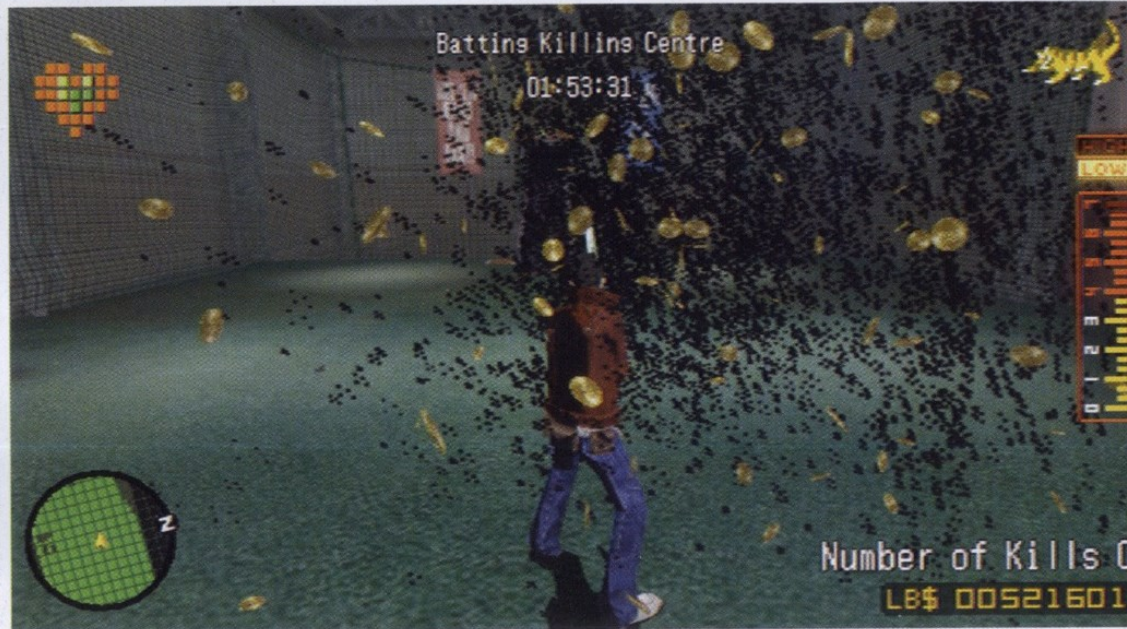
made them stop right on the borderline.

But it doesn't become boring because the game as a whole constantly alters the rhythms of the challenges you face. The fighting missions initially seem repetitious, but manage to introduce the basics and then push the possibilities. The structure is simple: Travis moves through a location and defeats scores of enemies before coming up against his target, the beam sword used by pressing the A button, and punches and kicks triggered with the B button. Attacks also depend on dodging, your position relative to the enemy and the angle at which you're holding the Wii Remote – as well as, for finishing opponents, Remote gestures. Acquiring a new beam sword will change all of Travis's moves in both style and effectiveness, and each assassination mission brings with it a new wrestling throw to use on your many foes. It balances flowing attack and subtlety with a real challenge as the game progresses, and what initially appears to be a limited system reveals such variation beneath the surface that it can be mastered to a degree that once-unbeatable enemies won't be able to touch you.

Beyond this, the later levels mix up the nature of the fighting to an almost schizophrenic degree: quite outside of the variations in locations and bosses, you'll have to fight side-on, top-down and upside-down, as well as conquer Great White Giant Glastonbury – a discovery best left to the player. And the bosses are a wonderful collection of freaks and eccentrics, with a level of invention in the battles that has more than a hint of *Metal Gear Solid* about it. That game's tendency to tease the fourth wall is here nothing less than an explicit gouging: characters freely slip in and out of their roles to comment on the action, and as *No More*







*Heroes* reaches its climax the twists become progressively more ludicrous and the 'game' becomes part of the broader story. It's breathless stuff at times, and so inventive in adopting little cinematic tricks (the first time you re-centre the camera is a delight) and contradicting itself gleefully that it's hard not to be swept along.

Needless to say, the game also has the trademark Grasshopper look, from the coloured freeze-frames that mark loading (accompanied by a guitar riff) to the cel-shaded figures with whom you interact. It's by far one of the best looking and most distinctive Wii games to date. There are some technical problems: there's noticeable pop-up in the town, which leads to some invisible walls, the framerate occasionally drops, and certain models (notably cars) are basic. The honourable exception is the audio, which has a sound effect for almost everything in the game of some comic note. The themes are infectious and you'll frequently hear a snatch of a remixed 8bit tune as you progress through the assassination missions.

Amid these disparate elements the game does have a unifying theme, and perhaps a surprising one for a Wii title: gaming culture and gamers. It goes beyond the retro stylings (the scoreboard is a particular highlight) and incidental tributes to other titles to a wry fatalism about what lies outside the excesses

of imagination: after the pyrotechnic thrills of each assassination, Travis returns to his motel room to two answerphone messages, one about the late return of a pornographic video with a highly inventive title, and one about the amount of money he has to pay for the next fight, necessitating a new job.

*No More Heroes* is a caricature of men's fantasies. It takes the inner life of a young mind, then expands and explodes it. It's overblown, out of proportion and ridiculous at times, numbingly familiar at others, and has a breadth of reference and a delicate

touch with even its most obvious sources that is unusual in gaming. It's a game in which you notice how loaded the dialogue is the second time around, a game full of niggly faults that ultimately feel irrelevant to the experience, a game that knows it's a game and wants you to know that it knows you know. Yes, the narrative is driven mainly by cutscenes, it can be a little basic in places, and it isn't a 'paradigm shift' in any sense, but it is proof that games can love their roots and use the quality of being a 'game' to give form to their stories – and excel at it. [9]



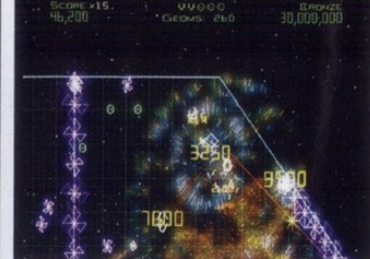
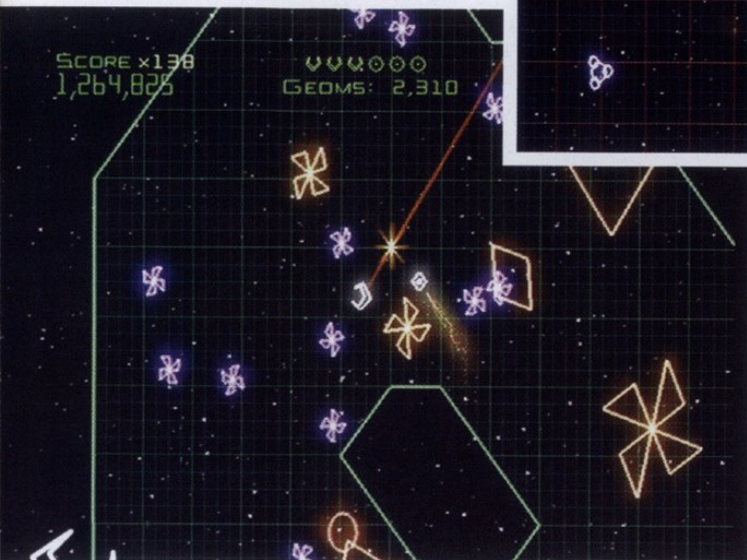
## Home sweet home



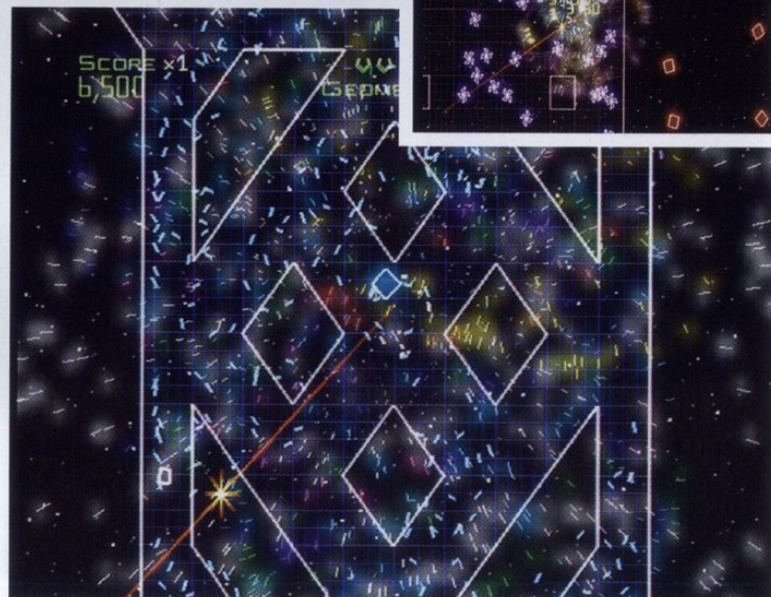
The level of detail in Travis's motel room, to which you'll return between missions. Several different aspects of each room can be played with, some functional (such as the wardrobe, allowing you to change outfits) and some simply diverting – such as the ability to play with a cat. There are J-pop videos to watch, a trading card wall (Travis is an otaku, after all) and a drawer for your beam swords (also home to a selection of non-browsable porn mags). It's all part of the compelling portrait of Travis's character the game paints, and a charm that, though incidental, is a huge part of *NMH*'s appeal.



Initially, the new controls feel a little inaccurate, but once you've learned to keep the star (which follows the Remote) near the body of the ship, it quickly proves itself as accurate and responsive as needed for dodging the crowd and keeping that all-important multiplier intact



Most of the levels are relatively basic shapes, but the variation any small changes can force in your approach is surprising – and when enemies can float outside of the confines before entering, it's hard to hide in the corners



## GEOMETRY WARS GALAXIES

FORMAT: DS, Wii (VERSION TESTED)  
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VIVENDI GAMES  
DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT PREVIOUSLY IN: E178, E184

### Helping hand



*Galaxies* has some new friends for you to play with: drones. Initially, they're not of much use and seem to aimlessly float around the screen as you play, but after levelling up a few times they turn into highly efficient tools – perhaps too efficient. It's all too simple, in the pursuit of high scores, to fly about and decimate your enemies while a high-level (invulnerable) drone puts your multiplier up to 150 in a flash. There are tactical possibilities with their individual talents over such varied stages, but their bludgeon-like nature at the higher levels doesn't justify their inclusion as such a central element of the game.

**G**eometry Wars *Galaxies* is the first ever *Geometry Wars* that hasn't been foreshadowed by the *PGR* series. That in itself may make some dismiss the game as a cynical cash-in, an attempt to monetise a product that was at one point Xbox Live Arcade's biggest seller as a standalone. There's something in that. But quite outside of the business question, two facts about the game have to be acknowledged: *Geometry Wars* is brilliantly built around its core mechanic, and *Geometry Wars Galaxies* has constructed an elaborate and varied structure around this.

Part of this combination is in the control method, which relies on the stick to move the craft while the Remote controls a small star on the screen that dictates the direction of fire. It doesn't just work as well as the dual analogue sticks: after practise, it feels easier and your scores begin to go through the roof. It's enough to make you realise that the greatness of *Geometry Wars* never lay wholly with the sticks – it was just as much about coordinating two directions, one of escape and one of attack, and this interplay is what *Galaxies*' many levels excel at.

And those levels are a microcosm of fine design, almost every one offering something significantly different from what has gone before, whether it's rippled walls that enemies can be herded into (or where you can stage your own last stand as the entrance gets packed) or a central blackhole that whirls you and enemies around in constantly shifting motions. The goal of every level is still the same – score big points – but in *Galaxies* it's given the tactical dimension of geoms.

First introduced in *Geometry Wars Waves*, geoms are small dots dropped by destroyed enemies that increase your score multiplier, up to a maximum of 150x – essential for the medals on any level. Each stage seems to split into two techniques thanks to this: there's the first section, where you're dodging and scrabbling for geoms; then the second part of acquiring enough points for a medal without dying and losing the lot. It creates moments of all-out attack and craven pot-shot scarpering around the walls and crannies that constitute the environments, and a shooting experience that at its best is breathless.

At its worst, however, *Galaxies* has some big problems. The biggest is that it is remarkably fond of spawning enemies behind your ship too quickly for you to move away. This is a result of the enemy having fixed spawn patterns that take no regard of your position, and it can be incredibly annoying – enough, in fact, to slightly taint the whole experience. Quite apart from that, there's a little philosophical chestnut that comes with the drones (see 'Helping hand') at their advanced levels: they simply make what should be teeth-skinning moments all too easy. Ultimately it's a part of the game and neither here nor there, but their use may seem cheap to the dedicated solo player.

Against that are the new controls, the sheer variety that Kuju has managed to build around the basics of the original, and the number of possible levels to play through (as well as *Retro Evolved* and *Waves* as bonuses). So, at a basic level, is it enough to turn a £5 game into a £25 game? The choice is yours but, for all that it falters occasionally, *Galaxies* could never be accused of lacking effort.

[7]





## NIGHTS: JOURNEY OF DREAMS

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), JANUARY 25 (UK)  
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: SONIC TEAM USA

It's an interesting coincidence that the sequel to *Nights Into Dreams* should be released so soon after *Super Mario Galaxy*. Though still dearly beloved, Sega's early foray into 3D game space on the Saturn rather fell into *Super Mario 64*'s shadow. And now, just as Mario has taken a brave leap into new forms of three-dimensional play, *Nights* returns.

That said, to understand *Nights*' appeal is to forget any comparison with Mario's engagement with space. Its unique charm was the result of a melding of 2D movement along gracefully snaking paths through 3D space, creating a beautiful tension between conscious decision-making and involuntary momentum that emulated the sensation of flying. This was combined with a scoring system that extended that initial thrill into an exacting test of puzzle solving and dexterity in maintaining chains of loops, pickups and defeating enemies.

Sadly, this pure form of *Nights*' gameplay isn't as substantial a part of *Journey Of Dreams* as fans might hope. In its place is a ragtag selection of different missions – five for each of its six worlds. One minute you'll be pushing bubbles into the centre of an arena-style level, with Nights flying around, into and out of the screen, the next fighting with anti-hero Reala by throwing balls at him. There are devoted platform levels with the two children – again a boy, Will, and a girl, Helen. There are top-down – superficially early *GTA*-esque – hunts for enemies through city streets. And that's not to mention the



When going full tilt in a *Nights* level, the visuals come into their own with dramatic passes under tree roots, through coral reefs and over rollercoasters. On closer inspection, however, the textures are drab and models are rough and simplistic

return of the A-Life artificial life toy, called My Dream, and two multiplayer modes.

The result feels schizophrenic. In fact, there are so many different forms of play that few feel fully polished and match the appeal of the 'true' *Nights* levels. It's as if Sega is insecure about *Nights*' fundamental design, instead twisting it into other forms in a bid to make *Journey Of Dreams* attractive to new audiences.

It's made all the worse because the *Nights* levels are easily the best part of the game. They aren't totally true to the original game, and take two different forms: chase missions where Nights must pursue a bird on each of three looped 'tracks', and challenges to chain



The three control schemes are Remote and Nunchuk, Classic Controller and Remote pointer. Though difficult to learn, the Remote pointer method avoids the octoguide's tendency to make certain gradients hard to follow



The curiously bland children, Will and Helen, have three worlds each and share the final one, but sometimes feature in each other's levels. The long cutscenes are fully voiced, losing much of the original's dreamy mood

a set number of links created by a jaunty blue flying octopus. Highlights include a mission that tracks through a Chicago-like casino city, spinning up through impossible towers of one-armed bandits and neon against a big-band swing soundtrack, and the closing level, which captures much of the euphoria of the original's conclusion.

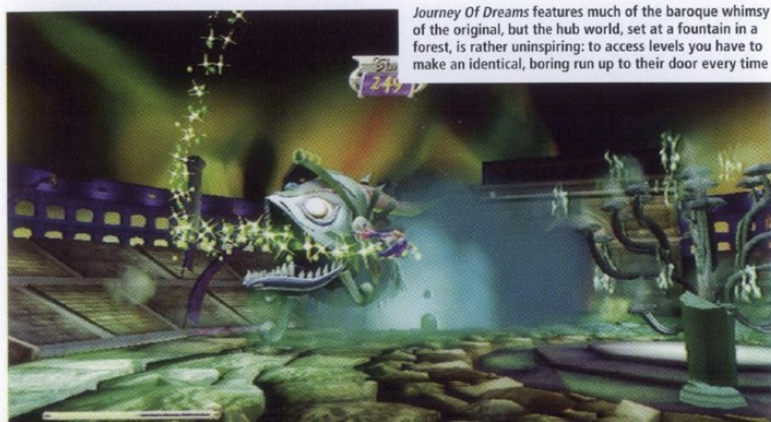
Also new to the mix are transformations. Apart from gimmicky missions in which *Nights* turns into a rollercoaster or a boat, it also has access to Persona masks, unlocked by completing worlds, that allow it to turn into a dolphin (for manoeuvring underwater), dragon (allows hovering and able to fly through wind) and rocket (*Nights* can fly faster) to give access to secret new areas, but none of these adds anything significant to *Nights*' essential capabilities.

That's the problem with *Journey Of Dreams*. It's too easy to say that this was a wasted opportunity, but *Nights*' peculiar charms were always going to be a hard act to follow. What it adds to the original formula is essentially redundant, and everything it does that is successful was already in place in the original. And, while Mario has continued to push at what forms of play 3D worlds can generate, *Nights* has spread itself thin while staying in the same place as the 11-year-old original. [6]

### Boss slog



*Journey Of Dreams*' boss fights are imaginative but share a lack of polish and consistency with the rest of the game. Will's first boss, a diabolical bouncy clown called Donbalon, involves Nights having to knock it up to the top of a long channel, but the camera frustratingly fails to show the obstacles ahead. Others feel arbitrary, such as Chamelon, who must be exposed from behind a backdrop by performing paraloops – loop-the-loop moves – which is all too easy to defeat accidentally or struggle fruitlessly against for ages, due to the mechanics being so opaquely conveyed. Others, such as a fish called Girania, are imprecise – it dissolves it into bubbles that have to be hovered up with paraloops, but quite how many bubbles need to be destroyed to take it to its final form isn't clear.



*Journey Of Dreams* features much of the baroque whimsy of the original, but the hub world, set at a fountain in a forest, is rather uninspiring: to access levels you have to make an identical, boring run up to their door every time





## R-TYPE TACTICS

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), MARCH (UK/US)  
PUBLISHER: IREM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

**D**espite blossoming from anonymous space adventure into ethically ambiguous war story, *R-Type* has always stayed true to itself, even its most unusual forms. For a turn-based strategy game locked to hexagonal tiles and numeric stats, *R-Type Tactics* is a surprisingly faithful coda to the adventurous *R-Type Final*.

You start at one end of a sideways-scrolling map, tasked with reaching the other with a small fleet of ships. Unit configuration is largely down to you, the only requirement being an all-important flagship – the king piece on this unusual chessboard. Options then include the various R9 fighters, several of their *Final* colleagues, multiple Forces, a classic supply drone for topping up ammo, and a Bydo engineer for replenishing health. Each has its own unique abilities rooted firmly in series lore.

After a lumbering start, which for importers involves a hyperspace jump on to the internet in order to decode reams of Japanese text, *Tactics* is a quite fascinating endeavour. Its reassembly of *R-Type* is thorough, turning everything from power-up grabs to Force-coupling into a strategic quandary. Just like a shooter, most of these concerns are spatial, the relative positions of friend, foe and astral scenery dictating both attack options and associated risk.

And just like *R-Type*, everything hinges on the charge and blast of the beam, a fragile weapon which discharges completely if you're hit,



Staggered fleet formations are essential, as beam weapons can obliterate multiple squadrons in a straight line. Force devices absorb damage, but never to the point of letting you charge head-on, flank attacks being a more reliable *Tactics* tactic

but deals colossal damage along its horizontal trajectory.

Momentum soon builds throughout consecutive Human and Bydo campaigns, missions (and bosses) harking back to *R-Types* of the past and encouraging the R&D of new ships in between.

But *Tactics* lacks what it needs the most, which is the seemingly limitless potential achieved by its predecessor. *Final* was a shooter but also a science – a chemistry set of movement and light. This, like the stats governing its every move, is altogether more finite and predictable. Fans will love it as a document as much as a game, though they'd be advised to wait until March, for the translated *R-Type Command*, to leaf through all it has to offer. [6]



Most ships serve to soften up enemies and lure them towards your big guns. Scouts, which achieve about three times the tiles-per-gallon of regular fighters, are great for getting the bad guys into fighting mood



## UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT

FORMAT: 360, PC RELEASE: JANUARY 25 (PC), TBC (360)  
PUBLISHER: SEGA DEVELOPER: PETROGLYPH



**W**estwood's realtime strategy legacy lives on in a number of places, but nowhere is that history quite so keenly felt as at Las Vegas-based Petroglyph Studios, the team behind *Universe At War*. This, its first independent game, relies on exactly the same mixture of RTS base-building and mad pomp that made Westwood's games so successful. Unfortunately for us, however, there is much that's stuck in the past about this game – including relatively crude visuals and a lacklustre singleplayer campaign.

Where *Universe At War* excels is in multiplayer games, which see the huge tech trees, filled with bizarre units, become fully available. While only two of the three factions are particularly fun to play, one of them – the Hierarchy – is supremely satisfying.



Each faction's tech tree is boosted over time by 'research' options. These come online as a skirmish progresses, giving players instant access to wider ranges of technology without having to worry about complex building options early on



Humans play a brief role, but are in stark contrast to the alien armies. The real meat of *UAW* is in pitting the outlandish alien units against each other, from walking bases to blackhole bombs

This is *Universe At War's* ace in the hole: a hyperbolic alien race that uses crop circles to call in units from orbit, relies on vast walking tripods for its base units, and keeps stereotypical alien 'greys' and giant shark-men as its shock troops. It's gloriously bombastic in the best tradition of the old-school RTS games, and makes for compelling entertainment as you swarm your way across the game's otherwise bland landscapes.

With the realtime strategy genre having recently conjured up delights such as *Command & Conquer 3*, *Company Of Heroes* and *World In Conflict*, it's tough to genuinely recommend *Universe At War*. Still, there's the cold fact that this is a game that takes great pride in its science-fiction absurdities and provides a genuinely entertaining skirmish game for those who still hanker for the base-building battles of old. [6]





## PAIN

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)  
PUBLISHER: SONY DEVELOPER: IDOL MINDS  
PREVIOUSLY IN: E184

**P**ain is one of the most earthy games released on a console in recent times. While the twin-stick shooters, swish board-game renditions and other small-time experiences of downloadable gaming may be the height of accessibility, *Pain* taps a different kind of broad-appeal root: slapstick GBH. Gamers have become familiar with physics-powered comedy in recent years, from jackass goofing in myriad shooters through to quaint showcases like *Sumotori Dreams* or *Stair Dismount*. *Pain* feels like a rare but exciting focus on this caricatured aspect of reality, an idea that could run and run, even if what's present in this PSN title is little more than a few pace-building strides.

Using a catapult, you fling your character into a small but reactive and populated district of a city, to cause him and the area as much 'damage' as possible. You've access to post-launch steering, the 'Ooch' aftertouch (and 'Super Ooch', activated with a shake of the pad), stunt poses, and object grabbing. All these facets are appreciable and worth putting into practice, even if they seem at first like an overload of the core idea. The result is a curate's egg, one that needs the wilful application of intention, even

though your best scores often come when least expected. As a result, sitting down to pass five minutes can sometimes feel like a pointless waste, while unearthing a brand new prop-rich alcove can easily hijack your attention for half an hour. Examples? An innocuous set of stairs takes you down to a series of subway platforms, while an impromptu bit of train surfing can show you the wealth of mischief tucked behind your launch point.

To its credit, there's much more content than first appears. But, perhaps also to its credit, your hunger for more can become too keen too quickly as the potential of it all, of creating off-the-cuff havoc through Havok, is almost edible. Six modes feature: a relaxed score-attack *Pain*demonium mode, a decent Mime Toss skill game, and the laborious coconut shy that is *Spank the Monkey*. Multiplayer options are more satisfying: a score-based round-robin in the form of *Horse*, plus *Bowling* and *Fun with Explosives*. Collectively, they feel like a moderate exploitation of *Pain*'s underlying potential. But it's also victim to that potential; with just one area to mess about with – and doubtless more to come – it currently feels more seed than flower. [6]



Upon launch, your character has a cacophony of soundbites to yell. Any resulting annoyance, however, is a boon – the more maligned your human payload becomes, the more gleeful it is to see his face torpedo into a brick wall



*Pain*'s tutorial is overlong and compulsory. It feels like a back-to-front approach, given that we'd rather have dived straight in before having to take in every aspect of the control scheme in one dissuasive gulp



## SPEEDBALL 2 TOURNAMENT

FORMAT: PC RELEASE: OUT NOW (STEAM), FEBRUARY (BOXED)  
PUBLISHER: FROGSTAR INTERACTIVE PICTURES  
DEVELOPER: KYLOTONN PREVIOUSLY IN: E181



**A**h, *Speedball 2*. Those were the days, right? Cue a bit of nostalgia – when the wisteria grew about your house and the good old Amiga played host to any number of youthful match-ups – which might be a bit dangerous when approaching this game. It's hardly unfair to make the comparison, however: this is *Speedball 2 Tournament*, and not *Speedball 3*, because it needs that nostalgia factor to entice players. And it owes a lot more than its brand to the older game.

*Tournament* is *Speedball 2* with better graphics and the potential for online play. That looks good on paper, but it's complicated when you have to ask: does *Speedball 2* still stand up? Next to, say, *Pro Evo*, it almost doesn't, and *Speedball 2 Tournament* is built so heavily around its predecessor that it suffers significantly, and new moves



You can customise your team to an enormous degree, from their individual speed stats to the colours of the outfits – though everyone knows good old *Brutal Deluxe* will always be the best

such as sprint, dodge and jump don't significantly alter the basic back-and-forth. Even the arena is the same as ever, down to the placement of the stars and teleports: weirdly, there are four different arenas that have no distinctions other than their themes – surely a missed opportunity.

Visually, the game is perfectly functional within its limits. There is, however, something antiseptic about the design, and that of the teams in particular, now far removed from the pixelated metal-men of the original. Where there was charm and artistry in the old designs, choosing to detail those basic representations rather than reimagining them makes the look of the new game too generic by far. *Speedball 2 Tournament* must have been a difficult project to work on, because it seems to be held back by a fear of making significant changes and a fan backlash as a consequence. It's not a bad game by any stretch, but it's far too much in awe of, and not noticeably superior to, the 16-year-old predecessor whose name it bears. [5]



The new dodge and sprint moves are difficult to pull off while using the WASD keys to run up, down and around, and a decent pad will surely be needed to take full advantage of online play





## SYPHON FILTER: LOGAN'S SHADOW

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW  
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SONY BEND

With a few double-crossing government bureaucrats and lots of tersely spat 'damn it's, it becomes clear from the outset that the *Syphon Filter* series has become firmly entranced by 24. Indeed, protagonist Gabe Logan is a mix of Jack Bauer and Solid Snake, though with few of the charms of either. It may only indirectly follow on from the events of the series' previous PSP incarnation, *Dark Mirror*, with one or two returning characters, but it's hard to care about the story, much as it's carefully told through economical cutscenes that lead players through a series of sadly hackneyed locations: a ship, a plane, a prison, Iraqi bunkers.

With few new features, the game itself is little more than an extension of *Dark Mirror* – a well-paced linear ride through scripted attacks and environments littered with crucial cover. But the central battle is against the PSP's controls rather than enemies: the standard scheme requires the digital face buttons to slowly and imprecisely control aim. Sony Bend is evidently aware – enemies tend to stay in position, popping in and out of cover until they're dispatched; when they occasionally rush your position, it often ends up in a messy death of botched aiming. It means that the game is functional and context commands rarely let you down, but playing is a measured and lifeless experience of efficiently lining up shots from behind cover until the scripting



Like *Dark Mirror*, *Logan's Shadow* features impressively full-featured online multiplayer, even if it shows up the control system still further, making flowing play extremely tricky

has been satisfied. There are other control schemes, such as one in which the analogue nub aims and the face buttons handle movement, but it requires extensive brain rewiring for hardened twin-stick users.

Visually, *Logan's Shadow* excels, and is yet another example of the PSP's power. Environments have enough complexity to be evocative while being simple enough to be clearly legible, and water effects are particularly well resolved. It's hard to escape the feeling that it should all be played with a DualShock, however. As efficiently and proficiently designed as *Logan's Shadow* is, it's unavoidably tied to the problems associated with action games of this type on PSP. [6]



Strangely, Logan is better depicted in-game than in the prerendered cutscenes, where he appears disturbingly closely related to Alan Titchmarsh



## SOLDIER OF FORTUNE: PAYBACK

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW  
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



We criticised *BlackSite* in issue 184 for its hamfisted attempts to crowbar political allegory into a game about shooting aliens, but compared to *Soldier Of Fortune: Payback*, it's a masterpiece of political nuance. In *Payback's* defence, it has none of *BlackSite's* identity crisis – it knows exactly what it is: a game in which you blast a variety of nasty non-Americans into chunks. You almost have to admire the purity with which this vision has been realised. *Payback* doesn't dally with fripperies like exposition or tactical combat; it's just about using guns to bloodily dismember Chinese, Middle Easterners, Africans, Russians and, finally, the Irish.

They share a number of similar characteristics, these foreign types – all rush straight towards you with little thought for their own safety; all feature dubious stereotypical accents; all of them have heads and arms that can be blown clean off. In fact, *Soldier Of Fortune's* damage model is probably its major selling point and, lamentably, the only thing that makes its combat entertaining. Some of the more open levels are interesting propositions – a



Most enemies go down with a shot or two, but the end-of-level bosses take an absurd number of bullets, although they appear to be no better armoured. You, though, have recharging health

terraced mountainside is a highlight – and the environments stand up well. Unfortunately, the potential is frequently fumbled by limited tactical options and appalling AI, reducing nearly every battle to a turkey shoot.

Online, the story isn't much different. While the six multiplayer modes offer fast-paced action and relatively trouble-free matchmaking, the games suffer from instantly lethal respawn placements and sticky scenery. Strangely, the number of objective-based modes (the reason for the enduring online popularity of *Soldier Of Fortune II: Double Helix*) has decreased to just one: a bomb defusal game-type.

The game has clearly been made on a budget – not that you'd tell from a full price-tag which, for a four-hour singleplayer campaign, might be considered a bit of a swindle. There's a heavy re-use of art assets, and the abrupt plot jumps suggest the pockets didn't go quite deep enough to furnish the game with cutscenes. This aside, few obvious glitches intrude into gameplay – which is just as well, since no part of *Payback* is remotely ambitious enough to excuse them. [4]



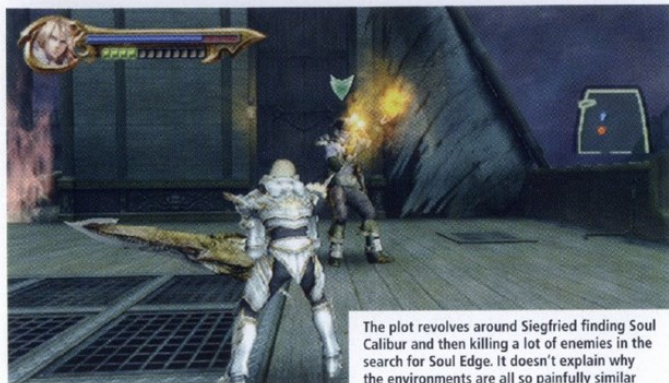
Enemy AI isn't up to much – in fact the enemies of the free world seem to borrow tactics from *Serious Sam's* legions of headless kamikazes, except they've left their bombs back at base





## SOUL CALIBUR LEGENDS

FORMAT: WII RELEASE: OUT NOW (US, JAPAN), TBC (EUROPE)  
PUBLISHER: BANDAI NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The plot revolves around Siegfried finding Soul Calibur and then killing a lot of enemies in the search for Soul Edge. It doesn't explain why the environments are all so painfully similar

In its short lifetime, the Wii has played host to a huge number of lazy ports and shovelware titles. *Soul Calibur Legends* should thus be a cause for celebration: a new instalment in a series that provided some of the previous generation's pugilistic highlights, developed exclusively for the Wii hardware. It should. In fact, it's bad enough to make you pine for the days of average PS2 games with a bit of waggle thrown in on Nintendo's system. It really is that bad, and it's sad to see a publisher with Bandai Namco's distinguished history release titles that suit the supermarket bargain section.

The game is a thirdperson adventure controlled in the usual way, except that the characters' weapons are controlled by swishing the Remote. For the first few minutes it can seem an inoffensive, if hardly revolutionary, control scheme – but

after some time spent with it, the constant swinging and annoying sword noises from the Remote begin to grate. This may be, in part, because the game has possibly the poorest line-up of enemies and environments yet seen on the current generation of systems, with a handful of enemies repeated ad infinitum and one boss used throughout the game (the colour of his scales changed each time). The idea that players will be fooled by the same level being repeated with a change in textures is a laugh.

*Soul Calibur Legends* is an unrewarding trudge that doesn't have any ideas beyond the most primitive. It's got some basic competence mechanically, but the constant repetition quickly removes any fun. Overall, it's uninspired, unoriginal, and does nothing for the Wii's software catalogue. [2]



This fine, noble, magnificent dragon has devoured almost the entire budget for *Soul Calibur Legends* – something that becomes obvious when you see it re-used with a colour change over and over again



## DRAGONEER'S ARIA

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: NOW (US), FEBRUARY (UK)  
PUBLISHER: KOEI DEVELOPER: HIT MAKER



The Japanese RPG has, in the past two years, seen developers experimenting with its traditionally immovable mechanics in some interesting ways. *Final Fantasy XII*, *Atelier Iris*, *Eternal Sonata* and *Grandia 3* have all shown that there are innovations to be made with what had become a restrictive template, and that some simple changes to the rhythm of exploration-exposition-encounter can create something new, remarkable and compulsive.

*Dragoneer's Aria*, by contrast, is a JRPG by numbers. From the androgynous, pony-tailed hero Valen and his archetypal band of three companions through to the unimaginative battle, crafting and mana systems, the clichés can be ticked off with depressing predictability. Innovation isn't a necessity if the traditions are executed with polish and pizzazz but, while there are depths to be explored here, there's little to drive you into them.

Developed by Hit Maker (no relation to the Sega developer of *Crazy Taxi* fame), the game reworks



Traditional multiplayer isn't catered for, but the game boasts a network quest for two to four players dubbed Dragoneer Mode. Successful completion of this one-off cooperative multiplayer mission nets players a secret item to carry over into their singleplayer game



Enemies on the field are represented by flying eyeball icons. By targeting the monster icon you can read information about the enemy group's make-up and compare their stats to those of your team before engaging in the turn-based fighting

many of the ideas presented in the firm's first poorly received PSP RPG title, *Blade Dancer*, while taking a more conservative overall approach in an effort to win over the mainstream RPG fan. In this aim the game is something of a failure. The convoluted story focusing on an elite band of warriors charged with protecting the six elemental dragons that act as guardians of the world will only be of interest to players well-versed in anime convention.

Likewise, battles are long and drawn-out affairs that lack energy and urgency, and the game's focus on multi-task grinding will be too much for most. The other points of mechanical interest – control of field attributes, item crafting, 'dragon orbs' (which add elemental status to weapons) and the materia-like 'magic luses' – are all ideas seen before, usually in a better-executed framework. Large-scale, new IP RPGs have been something of a rarity on this handheld, but as higher quality titles start to emerge, conformist and mediocre efforts like this become even less attractive and viable. [4]







### The third title in Bethesda's open-plan RPG series is definitely freeform, but far from free

**L**isten to someone describing the world of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and you'd be forgiven for running a mile when confronted with the cliché – in both RPG and D&D flavours – presented. Don't run just yet. Listen, however, to someone describing their experiences within that world, and you'd be forgiven for wanting to lean closer. Anyone who survives the harsh requirements foisted upon new players will, doubtlessly, have a handful of unique and engaging anecdotes to report. *Morrowind's* crux involves possibilities, options and a certain lack of constraint, things that players often pine for. But, as much as it's capable of a certain wish fulfilment, it's also an object lesson in being careful what you wish for.

Before we continue with that, let's first consider *Morrowind's* enticing outset. Despite the aforementioned cliché, the genre blend is alluring enough: a world composed of believably solid 3D space, explored in firstperson (or thirdperson, if you want an inferior time) and home to a continental sprawl of real-estate to explore: towns, caves, settlements, mines, forts, several thousand individual NPCs and several hundred thousand hand-placed objects. Despite



*Morrowind* has an extensive underground to explore. Mines, caves, shrines and hideouts pock the landscape as simple doors, but can lead to elaborate caverns and passages that can each easily steal hours of your time

the town of Seyda Neen, ushered into the customs and excise building to rattle through the paperwork. Choose a race, appearance, name, star sign, class (or craft your own), and you're handed some official orders as a trail of breadcrumbs to get you going. And then – BAM! – the world is your oyster. Go wherever. Do whatever.

nascent combat stats resulting in few blows that actually connect. Or worse, you're pummelled by a more interesting enemy, before having to flee. And then you're lost. Tutorial advice is at a minimum, as is the design that has long prodded you through most videogames. And if you're playing on Xbox, the lack of visual flourish – a stale colour palette and a terse draw distance – is all stick and no carrot.

Games are often, and easily, branded as interactive simply to set them apart from passive forms of entertainment. But that doesn't make gamers proactive. Involvement requires willing participation; *Morrowind* is an elaborate but inert gameworld, whose gears don't move until you actively propel them, and that take a wealth of effort to sound out. Aside from the rules of play, there's an entire culture to ingest and digest, covering politics, religion, geography, guilds, lore, drugs, booze, diseases, flora, fauna and even books

### The world is your oyster. The trouble with *Morrowind* is that it's an oyster you've got to prise open with your bare hands

its character-class system leaning towards archetype, the attraction is that you get to *be* it, not just wield it. Thieves stalk, sneak and steal like Sam Fisher minus the minigames. Assassins skulk and snipe. Warriors blunder and bludgeon. Not, of course, that you're ever constrained to a fated choice; such decisions only affect your start-out stats. Beginning as a nameless, faceless, homeless presence stowed in the hull of a ship, you're docked at

You're left to your own devices, just as you've always wanted. The trouble with *Morrowind*, however, is that it's an oyster you've got to prise open with your bare hands.

While this may sound like an idyllic beginning to a game, your actual first impressions will almost inevitably be disheartening. Off you bound, crest a hill, only to come under attack from a rat. A minute of comedic fist-fighting ensues, your





### PACK MENTALITY

Arguably, *Morrowind* is a game that needs expansion packs the least, and would in fact benefit from some kind of bizarre, anti-value contraction pack. Nevertheless, two were released in *Morrowind*'s wake. *Bloodmoon* added a new island in the north west of Vvardenfell, whose main quest line centred on werewolves, with the player able to contract a lycanthropic disease that would offer stat bonuses at the cost of transforming into a beast after sundown. *Tribunal* was perhaps more interesting, despite not offering anything so wild in terms of character modification. Restricted purely to the city of Mournhold, this self-contained diversion could either feel cramped or liberating when compared to *Morrowind* itself, by being a relatively manageable haven.



that can't just be picked up, but also read (even if their pages are few).

It's a heavyweight ask. And you're often dogged by incoherence. Sometimes, people notice you stealing even though the onscreen icon that indicates that you're not being detected is lit. Sometimes crimes aren't even reported; wronged folk just get violent – until you leave their homes, at which point they won't follow you. Other times, murders without witnesses are instantly acknowledged by the apparently psychic and teleporting guards. While *Morrowind* has a day/night cycle and a weather system, its citizens are static, despite the simple paths they sometimes traverse back and forth within a town on a curt, never-ending loop. They never sleep. In contrast, of course, to the population of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

### Much of Morrowind's

fallibility is true of *Oblivion*, despite its perforated beauty and physics-driven solidity. *Oblivion* made strides for accessibility, and a somewhat more elaborate world – people, for example, actually have routines, and sleep in their beds at night, a rather affecting presence for after-dark



Jeremy Soule's soundtrack is by turns warm, doleful and quietly glorious. Given how few pieces it consists of (and how long the player is expected to roam), it's a credit that they have presence without intruding

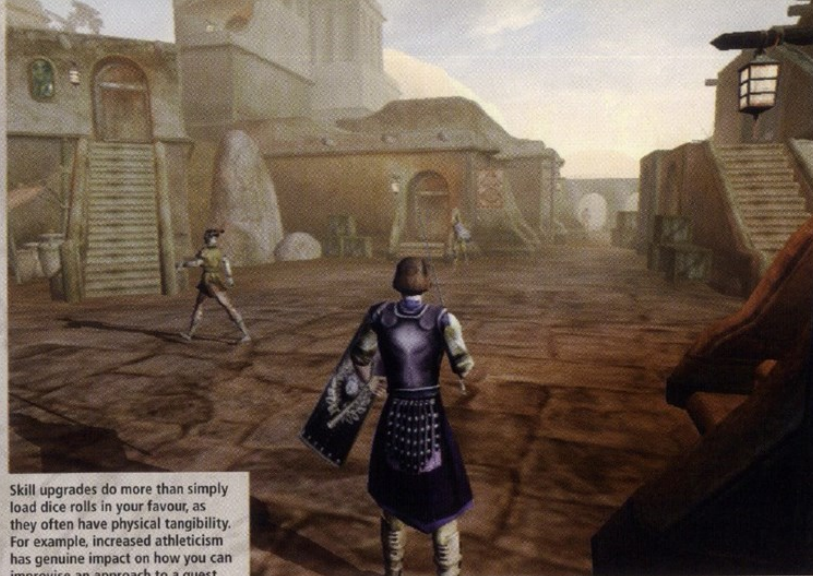
housebreakers. Fast travel is possible to any town, or any previously visited key location. Players recover fatigue – a measure that dictates how effectively they can wield weapons, among other things – even when running. A quest log keeps finer tabs on your heroic accounts, in a much friendlier manner than *Morrowind*'s quickly clogged journal. Objectives are tagged. Cursor details help the player keep tabs on criminal activity. And so on (incidentally, the levelling systems in both are equally cumbersome to unravel).

*Morrowind*, however, remains the least constrained of the two. Plot-dependent characters can't be killed in *Oblivion*; in *Morrowind*, the quest line can be broken – a small text box alerts you to the fact – and you're still free to remain an adventurer. Towns aren't separated from the outside world by a loading screen. Aspects that could never be held up as sleek game design are nonetheless powerful: character dialogue – apart from passer-by soundbites – is never spoken, instead metered out via rich clumps of text, and conversation strands are far more profuse than those of *Oblivion*. Walking is the only way to conserve fatigue, forcing you to stroll the land; fast travel isn't available, but silt strider creatures,



NPCs don't just sell (above) or police (left), they also judge, keeping track of your reputation and personal relationships. Talking to them with a weapon drawn and in a state of undress isn't the best of PR moves





Skill upgrades do more than simply load dice rolls in your favour, as they often have physical tangibility. For example, increased athleticism has genuine impact on how you can improvise an approach to a quest

boat rides and Mages' Guilds offer a shortcut between major settlements. Such aspects may be dissuasive to the received gaming mentality but, while it's likely that the average *Oblivion* player spends more time in the game before walking away, it's just as likely that those who managed to submerge themselves in *Morrowind* felt connected and invested all the deeper.

## The reward is that, within the bounds marked out, you're truly free to roam, to muddle, to amble, to be lured from the path of one quest by another

**So, what payoff** awaits? The assessment so far may seem glum, but a careful and cautious approach is essential to savouring *Morrowind*'s seemingly everlasting gobstopper. The reward is that, within the bounds marked out, you're truly free to roam, to muddle, to amble, to be lured from the path of one quest by another, to play out a great number of bespoke adventures that may only ever exist in your head; your trawl of a given dungeon will be your own story, and no one else's. Even exploration is an experience in itself, and isn't about hoovering secret tokens or soaking up completion percentages. The island of *Morrowind* that exists on the disc can be threadbare and tenuous, but be undeniable and persistent in your mind. Also, even on Xbox, it's a game that throws up snapshots of austere, worldly beauty, where sunrise and landscape conspire against any shortcomings to provide a memorable montage; again, these moments feel personal in a way few other adventures can match.

But, even if you sink your teeth gums-deep into *Morrowind*, the fabric of its world is still precarious. Play it for long enough, and you become

something more than a resident: an expert. You no longer see the world, but the design that powers it. You're now standing too far back from the rabbit hole, and it begins to look like nothing more than a rabbit hole. Play *Gradius V* for 100 hours, and it could be argued to be akin to a religious experience of high skill and furious elegance, honed to the point of

inimitable, zero-ping connection between gamer and game. Play *Morrowind* for 100 hours, and it's just as arguable you'll feel like nothing more than a cog in a vast but plodding machine, one whose quest is now one more of compulsion rather than any true care for the fate of the land; a job, of sorts, now reduced to nothing but activity-crunching and

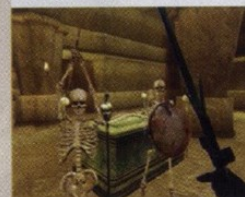
data processing. This is, of course, just an extreme example of the vapid nature of RPG longevity, where commitment can be mistaken for involvement. It's perfectly possible – if very unlikely – that you'll still be as concerned and invested in Vvardenfell as a world, and not a gameworld.

So, for a moment, forget *GTAIII*. Its template, while alluring and roomy, is bounded in ways that the *Elder Scrolls* games aren't. If videogames are tending towards experiences that attempt to capture a certain aspect of reality – the complexity of civilisation – then *Morrowind* is not just a forebear, but a post-mortem to boot. It's both lesson and warning of the worth of effort and patience, for both gamer and game-maker. As the relationship between *Morrowind* and *Oblivion* shows, it's one thing for a game to let the player go where they want, but another for players to let the game go where it wants.



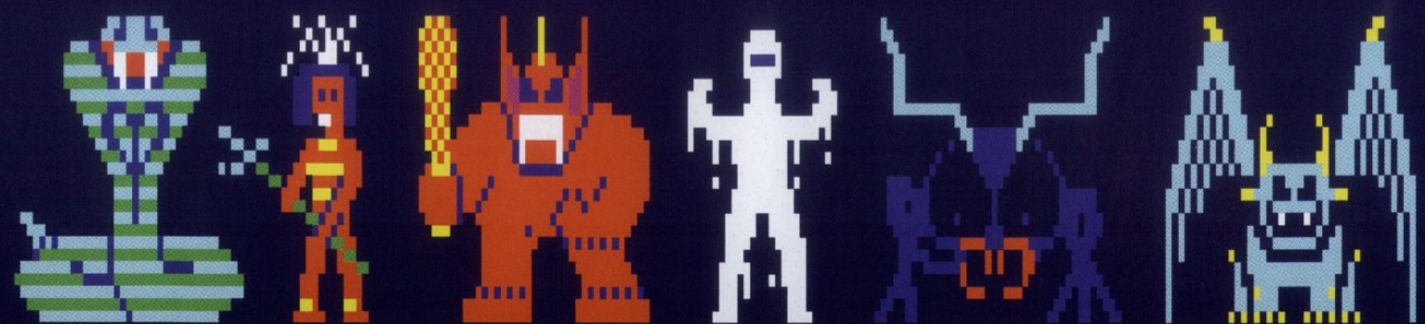
## TRIPLE BYPASS

It has to be one of the most intriguing speed runs around: despite the gargantuan number of play hours contained within *Morrowind*, its main quest can be completed in less than 15 minutes. It's best appreciated by those who've steeped themselves in the minutiae of the game somewhat, as it's more a feat of organisation and exploitation than one of showboating skill. A single-segment time of 14 minutes and 26 seconds is recorded by speeddemosarchive.com, attributed to Ryan Bennitt, and is composed of a dizzyingly focused sprint of theft, item purchasing and potion crafting, plus bouts of teleportation and levitation.

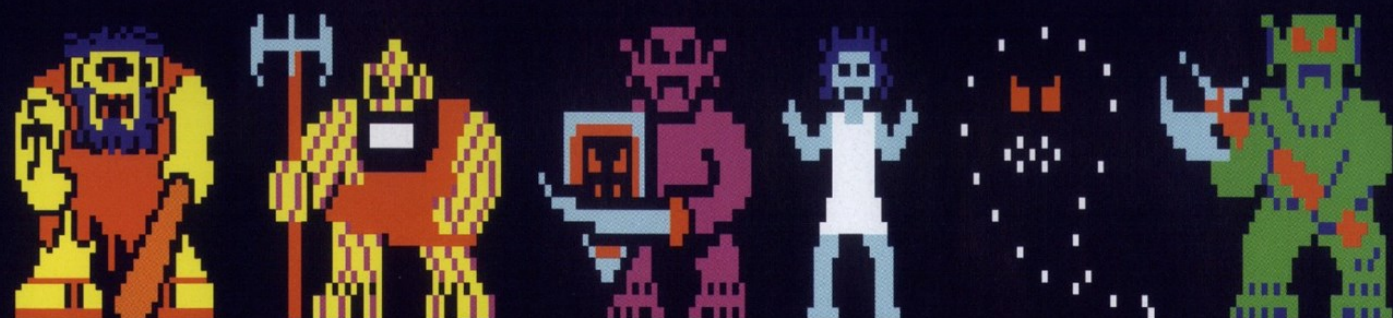


*Morrowind* is almost a case study in power of perspective. While a thirdperson view is available, and allows you to parade your armour and weapons, it is firstperson that's the most affecting in terms of appreciating the rich prop population and a sense of exploring a persistent space





# The Black n





# THE MAKING OF...

## THE BLACK ONYX

Defining the Japanese videogame market was no easy task for the man who introduced the country to the RPG

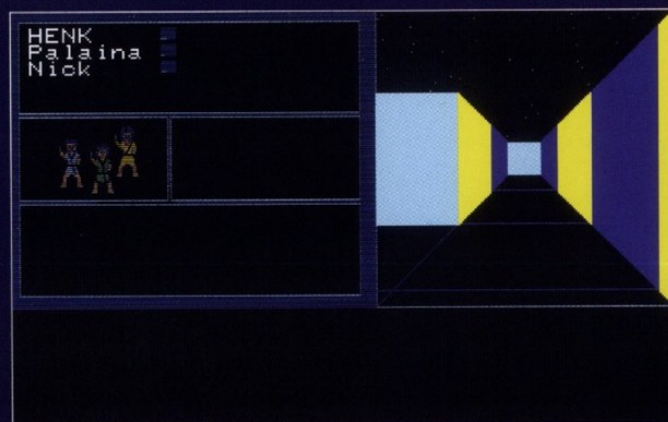
FORMAT: MSX, NES PUBLISHER: BULLET-PROOF SOFTWARE DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE ORIGIN: JAPAN RELEASE: 1985

**H**enk Rogers arrived in Japan in 1976, young, jobless and hot on the tail of a girl. Within eight years he'd have written, designed and coded his first videogame, sold Japan a genre that would go on to dominate its videogame industry creating billions of dollars of worldwide revenue, and, naturally, made the girl his wife. In 12 years, he would discover a game called *Tetris* at a Las Vegas game show, and would travel to Russia with Nintendo to secure the exclusive rights to market it on consoles. For a man whose only experience of coding was working on mainframe computers as a student and whose only brush with gaming was in pencil-and-paper roleplaying, starting out was no mean feat.

"I was an avid gamer as a student at the University of Hawaii in the 1970s," he explains. "I'd

**"I made a decision to develop a type of game that existed in the US but not Japan. There were no RPGs, so I decided to take a chance"**

joke that my minor was in Dungeons & Dragons. We had a gamer's club called ARRGH (Alternative Recreational Realities Group of Hawaii) where we'd play with our own unique rule-set, and I think it was here that I caught the game design bug. Personal computer software publishing



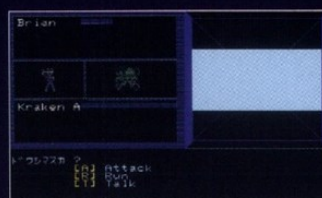
At one point Rogers accidentally destroyed the directory on the only disc copy of his monster graphics. Rather than redrawing them, he painstakingly rebuilt the directory so he could learn something from it

became a viable business in Japan in 1982. I noticed shops selling computer games on cassette tape popping up here and there, so I decided I wanted to make a game,

"I made a conscious decision to develop a game type that existed in the US but not Japan. There were no RPGs – computer or paper – to speak of in the country at the time, so I decided to take a chance and do one. I didn't speak or read Japanese back then, so it was a total reverse engineer of titles I had enjoyed back home."

**The game was** designed, drawn, and coded by Rogers alone over an intense nine-month period in 1983. Rogers struggled to squeeze his vision into the 64K his machine afforded him, a constraint that meant only 20 per cent of his original ideas made it into the final production. Originally designed to offer three job classes to players, in the end the game had to be stripped back to just one: warriors. Sequel *The Fire Crystal* offered players the chance to play as mages, while the third game in the trilogy, the unreleased *Moonstone*, was created for monks.

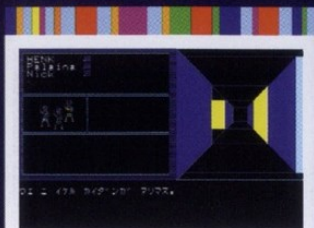
"I divided the development job between the only languages available for the machine: BASIC



Rogers has kept a toe in gaming, and runs several companies from his home in Hawaii. One wing of his business, Avatar Reality, is busy creating a virtual world which may contain a version of *Black Onyx*

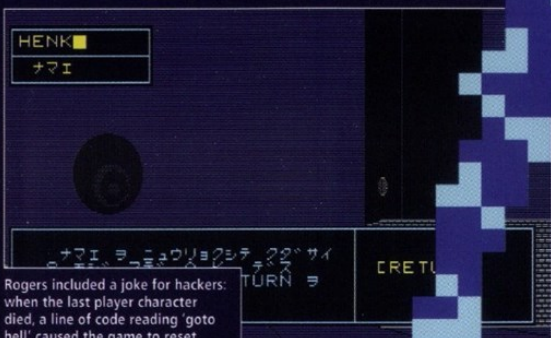






## CHILD'S PLAY

As Rogers worked on the game from home, he suffered frequent interruptions from his enthusiastic three-year-old son Michael. "He would sneak into my programming room and mash at random keys on the keyboard when I went out," explains Rogers. "His unintentional amendments to my code caused some serious headaches so, to get around the problem, I set up a black-and-white monitor next to mine. I set a calculator down in front of the black-and-white monitor and explained that this was his computer and the colour one was mine. He spent hours sitting next to me typing on his 'keyboard', thinking he was helping me with my work. I think I may have done some damage there, actually. No, he did not become a programmer."



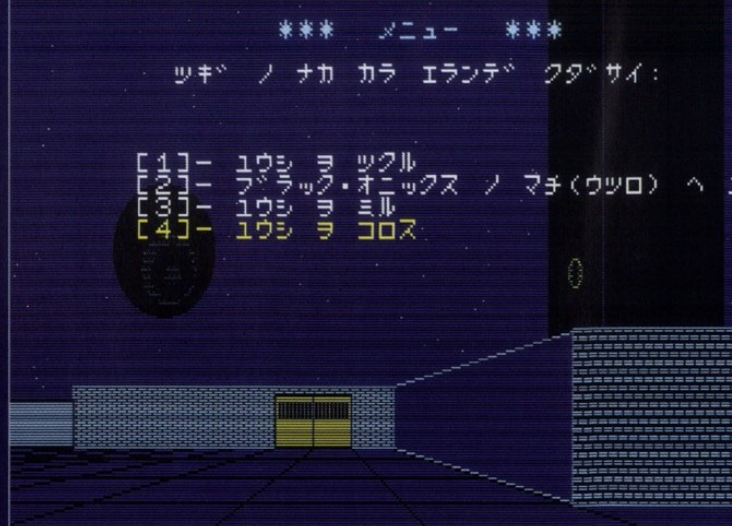
Rogers included a joke for hackers: when the last player character died, a line of code reading 'goto hell' caused the game to reset

and assembler," he explains.

"The game had two main technical elements: movement and everything else. Movement was a fake 3D like Wizardry written in Z80 assembler while the graphic editor, map editor and everything else was coded in BASIC.

"The 20K of graphics space was split evenly between monsters and humans, opting for variation instead of animation: 30 monsters, 28 human bodies and 50 human heads. I also built a name generator, which gave each character you meet in the game a name in addition to their individual appearance. The plan was that your character was going to be your avatar and you could move it from game to game, friends' games and sequels, on a cassette tape. It was all quite innovative stuff".

But getting the game into Japanese hands was far from simple. "Halfway through development I pitched *Black Onyx*



to a publishing company and made a verbal agreement with the president for a distribution deal," explains Rogers. "We agreed to split the profit after subtracting marketing and manufacturing costs. After three months of work I could see the light at the end of the development tunnel and told them I wanted to formalise the agreement. But the paperwork

screenshots to the ads. The word had not got out; nobody knew what an RPG was and we were on the brink of collapse."

**Not one to give up easily,** Rogers decided to go straight to the press. "I rolled up my sleeves and started knocking on doors," he explains. "I visited every computer game magazine in

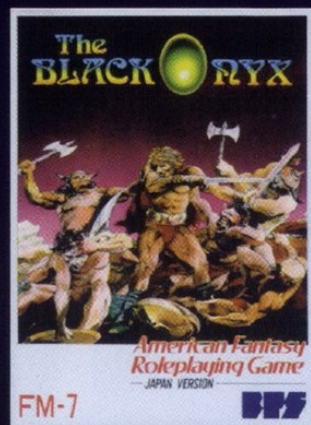
**"The plan was that your character was going to be your avatar and you could move it from game to game on a cassette tape"**

they tried to get me to sign bore no resemblance to the original verbal agreement. I pulled out of the deal, leaving me without a publisher.

"In desperation my wife called Softbank, a PC game distributor, to ask them for an introduction to a reliable publisher. After they had heard my pitch they advised us to self-publish, saying that they would place a large initial order to help out once the game was finished. In their words, all I had to do was 'get my wife to answer the phone'. Obviously publishing is not that simple, but we naively did it anyway, borrowing \$50,000 from a friend to set up Bullet-Proof Software. It was one of the best decisions I ever made."

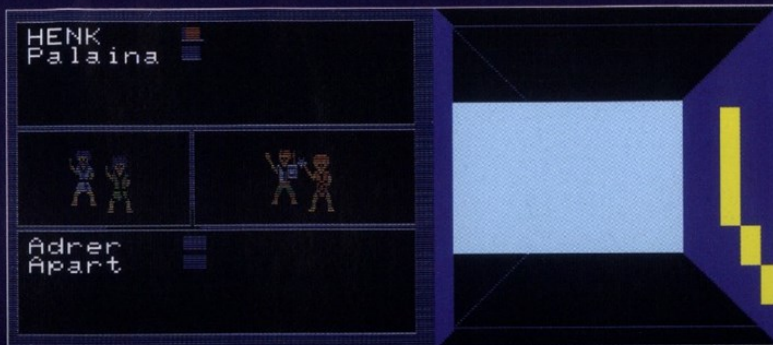
However, immediately after release *Black Onyx* was to hit some more near-fatal problems: "The game was finished just in time for Christmas 1983, but Softbank reneged on their promise to initially order 3,000 pieces and ordered 600 pieces instead. My rudimentary advertising campaign resulted in zero phone calls in the first month and four in the second after we had added some

Japan, sat the editor down and created his character. I had a set of questions I'd ask them in Japanese: 'What's your name? Which one of these 50 heads looks the most like you? Please pick out some clothes to wear'. Then I'd tell them: 'This is you. Now we are going to go on an adventure'. I would play with their character for an hour while they looked over my shoulder. That way they'd see how to map with



The game's popularity ensured it was ported across to almost every Japanese console platform in the ten years following its release



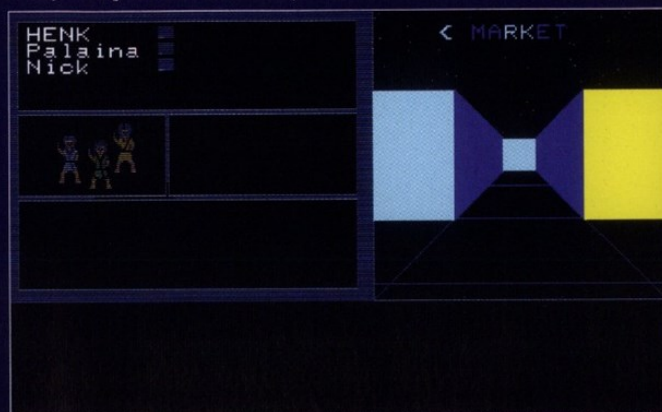


ナニヨ ハナシカケマスカ?

[JJ] Join us.

luck & goodbye.  
money or your life.

The 'karma' system was not outlined in the game's instructions. Instead Rogers relied on viral word of mouth to get the clue as to how to complete the game out into the community



graph paper and pencil, how to explore the world, and buy and equip armour and weapons."

This hands-on approach to PR paid off spectacularly. In the April editions of every Japanese gaming magazine *Black Onyx* had secured rave reviews. By May Bullet-Proof Software was selling 10,000 copies a month at ¥7,800 (£36/\$72) a unit – the most expensive game on the market at the time.

Voted game of the year by the readers of *Login* magazine (the best-selling Japanese gaming magazine at that time), *Black Onyx* sold around 150,000 copies, not counting huge numbers of rentals. The game's gigantic success paved the way for the other Japanese developers to bring their own RPG titles to market. The first *Dragon Quest* team went on the record praising *Black Onyx* as the influence for them investigating other western titles in the genre (specifically *Wizardry*). And so the RPG hacked and slashed its way into the Japanese videogame industry and consciousness.

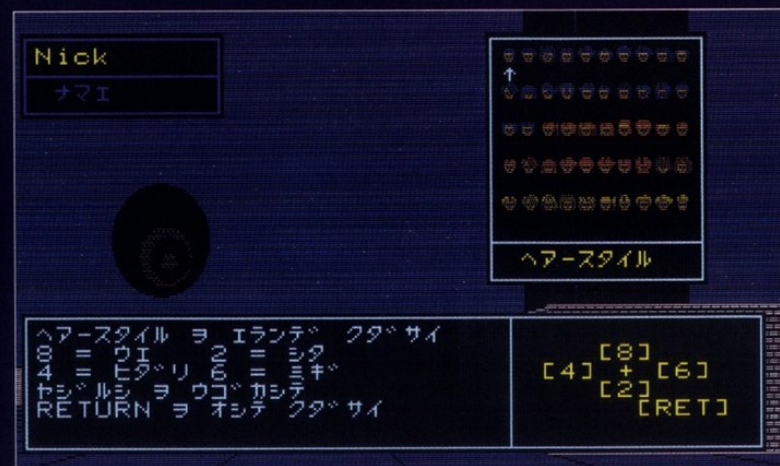
Rogers is philosophical about the adaptation of his ideas in to rival titles at the time: "I saw so

many elements of *Black Onyx* replicated in subsequent RPGs and even titles across other genres, but what can you do? For example, I ditched the numbers that indicated player health for blue bar-graphs that turned red as the player got damaged. This system is widely used not only in RPGs but in fighting games such as *Street Fighter* and *Virtua Fighter* today."

As well as introducing the RPG genre to Japan, Rogers' game was responsible for launching some heavyweight videogame careers. Hisashi Suzuki, a Keio University student and part-timer at Bullet-Proof Software, wrote the manual. Suzuki would later go on to become president of Square Enix. "I meet a lot of people in the industry in Japan. Some don't know the history," says Rogers. "When I mention I used to have a publishing company in Japan, Bullet-Proof Software, they ask if I had anything to do with *Black Onyx*. I say I designed and developed it and a lot of the time they'll exclaim: 'Oh my god, you're the reason I'm in this industry!'"

Bullet-Proof Software immediately went into production

of a sequel but, by the third game, Rogers felt like he was being left behind by the bandwagon he had set in motion: "The game made such a huge impact and caused so many clones to be developed I fast realised we just could not keep up. *Dragon Quest* was a game built specifically for the Famicom and Famicom players. The graphics and the story come from the manga world, which inevitably resonated with the Japanese psyche much louder than the *Lord Of The Rings* style I was familiar with. A westerner cannot compete with that kind of cultural incision, so I started looking around the world for games to bring to Japan instead. I guess then, in some ways, the success of *Black Onyx* was not only responsible for *Final Fantasy* but also for *Tetris*."



To reach *Black Onyx*'s final dungeon, the Black Tower located near the town of Utsuro in the game, players had to raise the hidden karma statistic to 100 per cent by talking to NPCs and allowing weaker foes to escape unharmed

## PRECIOUS STONES

In the six years between Rogers' arrival in Japan and the commencing of work on his RPG, he worked in the gemstone business. It was from this time sorting through uncut, unpolished gem material that the game got its name as well as its unique prize: the first 1,000 players to complete the game received a certificate signed by Rogers, while the first 100 players on each hardware platform were rewarded with a real black onyx.

"It was the cheapest, yet most apparently valuable, giveaway I could think of," explains Rogers. "I never revealed their actual cost to journalists despite being asked regularly. When asked about the value of a black onyx, I'd always answer 40 days' hard labour, which was the average time it took to complete the game. Needless to say I did not give them all away and still have some of the original gems."



# Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

## Directing the future

**Machinima is seen as a subset of games culture, but one firm hopes to break out a new artform with the launch of a dedicated production tool**



One of the first asset packs available for Moviestorm was a free zombie pack, which was released just in time for Halloween

**T**he development of machinima, or animation made using game modding tools, seems to have reached its second critical point. The first came as the earliest examples of the form, such as the *Quake*-originated Diary of a Camper, morphed into more complex fare such as the *Halo*-based Red Vs Blue and *The Sims*-inspired The Strangerhood. As the tools improved, so did the quality of the short movies. Yet despite growing popularity on the Internet, via DVD releases and even the

Since then, however, Lionhead's *The Movies* and the sandbox environment of online world *Second Life* granted more cinematic tools as well as increasing the variety of assets, hence providing fans with more artistic headroom. Even so, there still weren't any pure-play machinima tools.

"*The Movies* was great for machinima; 200,000 people posted online shorts made using it," enthuses **Matt Kelland**, creative director at Cambridge-based company Short Fuze. "Now we know there are 200,000 people who like making machinima who aren't being supported." It's a gap Kelland and Short Fuze are determined to fill. That's why they've spent two years working on a machinima package, Moviestorm.

Kelland, together with CTO Dave Lloyd, first got the machinima bug when working on their own Bond-inspired short, No Licence. The experience proved both exciting, in terms of the freedom to make a film, but also frustrating in terms of the technical barriers.

"People want to make movies. The appetite is enormous, but without the right tools it's hard and time consuming," Kelland explains. "The company's motto is 'We want a million kids to make a million movies'. I believe we will see a

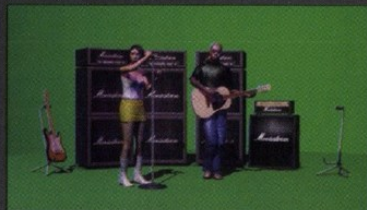
**"People want to make movies. The appetite is enormous, but without the right tools it's hard"**

occasional broadcast TV spot, the genesis of the enterprise limited the audience as well as restricting the creatives' visions. After all, to get those films made, the virtual actors had to be physically moved around in-game using game controls, while directors relied on the characters, animations and props created by the game's developers for their settings. Small wonder so many flicks revolved around 'what do you mean, we're trapped in a game?' jokes.

[www.moviestorm.co.uk](http://www.moviestorm.co.uk)



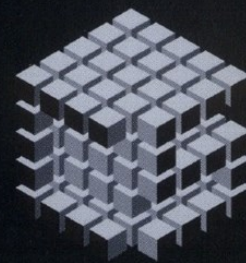
Thanks to its wide range of sets, Moviestorm enables machinima makers to move beyond games and use more traditional environments (above). One use for Moviestorm could be music videos (top right). Looking behind the scenes, what's important is how you place cameras and cut between them (right)







As well as letting you get your camera close-up on characters' faces when setting up cameras, Moviestorm also has rendering options including the ubiquitous cel-shading



million people doing this. Moviestorm provides everything you need to make a film. Like Lego for machinima: it provides all the blocks."

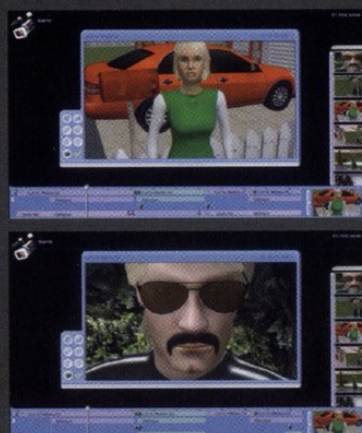
Yet even Moviestorm, which is currently available in beta form, has a learning curve. It works by mixing the metaphor of *The Sims*-style gameplay with a layer of camera controls and basic editing functionality.

Opening up a scene, you can create your own sets by dragging and dropping individual bits of scenery or using stock templates such as room interiors, chat-show studios and malls. Then it's on to choosing the customisable characters. Combining the two, you take a director's view of the action, which is set up by getting the characters to interact using right-click commands such as walk, sit down, fight, kiss, etc. These, in turn, break down into more complex context-sensitive animations and interactions. Audio can be imported, too, with characters lip-synching in time to the dialogue. Then, once the scene is complete, it's a case of placing cameras around the set. These can provide simple static shots or be attached to moving characters. You can, of course, cut between them as you'd like. "The main thing that differentiates Moviestorm

from mod tools is that it's completely freeform," explains Kelland. "The single biggest innovation is the basic camera. It's a bit more complex than a standard firstperson camera but it's a lot more powerful. It allows you to think about what you want to film and what you want in the frame, rather than worrying about where to place the camera. If I want a close-up of the character's eyes, I'll click on the eyes and drag them to where I want them in the frame and then zoom in and out to get the shot."

The other important element is the amount of character animation available in Moviestorm. Unlike game engines, this includes many subtle movements. "One disadvantage of working with a game engine is the developers put a huge amount of effort into producing a small amount of characters and a large number of highly restricted animations. We're giving people a huge amount of animations across a much broader spectrum of characters," Kelland says.

Indeed, the whole company is based on the premise that, with Moviestorm available as a free download, users will happily pay around \$10 to buy additional asset packs that will provide specialised settings, assets and animations (see 'Building the ecosystem').



The view from the director's chair: each of the different camera viewpoints is shown on the right, and you can vary the position, focal length and focus for each of them by toggling them into the main window

In the future, Kelland also hopes to kickstart a marketplace where talented modellers and animators can sell their own creations, with Short Fuze skimming off its margin, of course. Such a business model is predicated on a large number of users, though: a million kids making a million movies, perhaps.

But to get to that point, Moviestorm will have to push the machinima community into being something more than a niche of talented people playing around within game culture.

Kelland is certainly up for the job. "I think we're starting to see a schism inside the machinima community," he says. "A lot of what's now created is purely fan-based: by *World Of Warcraft* fans for *World Of Warcraft* fans. Red Vs Blue is great if you play *Halo*. But once you've made a film about game characters realising they're game characters, what do you do next? One of the big challenges for us is saying: 'Machinima isn't about games. It's a technique for making films'. It will take time. The majority of machinima will be game-related for a while, but the groundswell is coming."

## Building the ecosystem

"Building the ecosystem" – that's very Edge," laughs David Bailey, Short Fuze's CEO. He should know. In his previous role as MD of UK developer Black Cactus, he was never shy about making his views known to journalists about the state of the business. "The whole publisher/developer model is fundamentally broken," he booms. "If you're a start-up, you need a business model where you meet your customers directly. We're building Moviestorm step by step but you can already use it to create a movie that's worth watching. We have thousands of users and they really care and want this to work. That's very exciting."

What about Matt Kelland's million kids, though? "Never underestimate the power of a million amateurs with the keys to the factory," he replies, using the aphorism of Web 2.0. "Actually, while we need a certain number of users to be profitable, it's not a very large number. What's important is these are creative people. Once you have them using your tools and posting to your site, you have something magical, because the more movies people make, the more people see those movies. The more people see those movies, the more they come back to Moviestorm. And the more they come back to us, the more content we sell, and the better the movies are, and round it goes. And you know what, so far, it's working out fine."



So long as you have a decent graphics card, Moviestorm can render depth-of-field, motion blur and other cinematic effects



# Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

■ **NAME:** Free Radical Design

■ **DATE FOUNDED:** April 1999

■ **NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES:** 200

■ **KEY STAFF:** Steve Ellis, Dave Doak, Karl Hilton, Graeme Norgate



■ **URL:** [www.freeradicaldesign.co.uk](http://www.freeradicaldesign.co.uk)

■ **SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY**  
The *TimeSplitters* series, *Second Sight*



Free Radical's *Haze*, which leads on PS3, is aiming to bring a new level of narrative sophistication to the FPS



■ **LOCATION:**  
Nottingham, UK

■ **CURRENT PROJECTS:**  
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and an unannounced  
project with LucasArts

## ■ ABOUT THE STUDIO

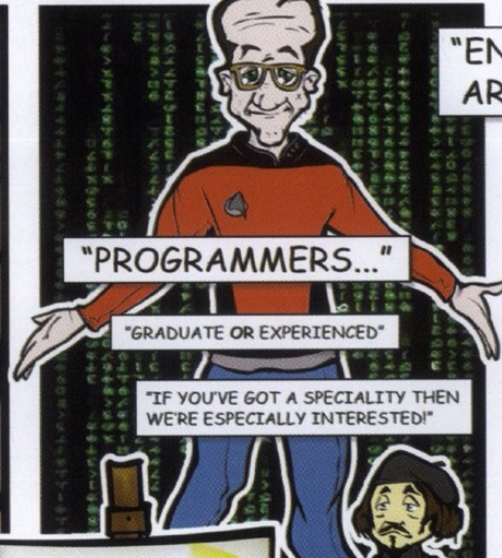
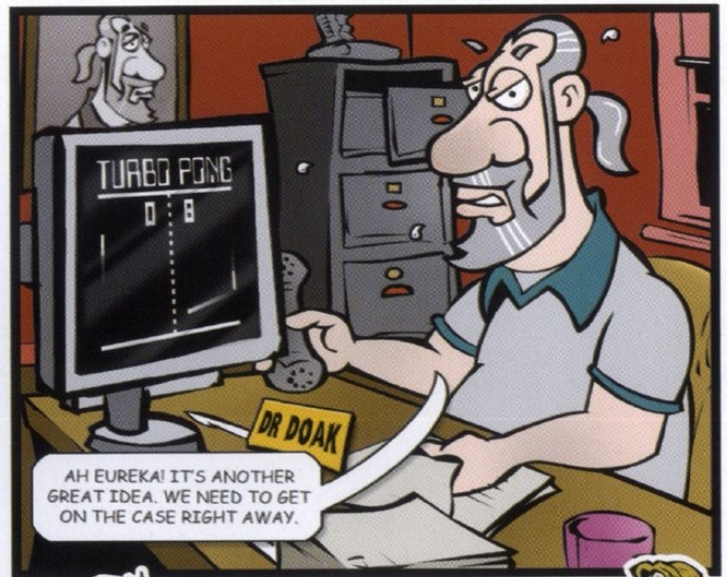
"As the brains behind N64's *GoldenEye* and the original *Perfect Dark*, the four founders of Free Radical shaped the direction of console gaming forever before they even started trading as a company. Beginning life as a small team of dedicated people working from a small office in central Nottingham, they have grown into one of the largest and best-known independent developers in the world. However, even tipping the scales at 200 employees, they have never forgotten the open-door design policy that made those early titles such

successes, welcoming suggestions from each and every department.

"Perhaps most famous for its sense of humour, Free Radical wears its independence on its sleeve having worked with a cross section of the industry's biggest publishers, including Eidos, Codemasters, EA, Ubisoft and LucasArts. Developing original IPs has been the company's bread and butter for the past eight years, and their innovation doesn't stop there – developing all their tools in-house, as well as being one of the first in the business to pay their staff overtime."











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BY N'GAI CROAL

## PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

The innovator's dilemma

**B**y the time you read this, the fine folks here at **Edge** will have already reviewed Criterion Studios' new racing game *Burnout Paradise* [see p86]. As I write this, I have no idea whether they'll love it or loathe it, but based on my hands-on time, I can't possibly imagine that they'll be indifferent to it. That's because Criterion has fully embraced what it means to make an open-world racing game, with no compromises made for the lovers of previous entries in the much-lauded franchise. Are you a fan of circuit races, which made up the bulk of the events in prior games? Too bad, they're gone, replaced entirely by point-to-point competitions. Did you genuflect before Crash mode, as introduced in *Burnout 2* and refined in *Burnout 3: Takedown* and *Burnout Revenge*? So sorry, but the pre-set crash junctions have been replaced by the ability to trigger an almost *Katamari Damacy*-like chain of

company Electronic Arts, for example, has often been criticised for lacking innovation in its products, an accusation which most likely stems from EA's deliberate annualisation of franchises wherever possible. (Whenever I hear this, I ask myself whether people remember that EA is the same publisher that brought us *The Sims*, pushed its sports teams to make more creative and extensive use of the right analogue stick, and will deliver *Spore* unto us at some point in the future.) This has led to a focus on what EA calls 'feature innovation', or coming up with new or revised bits of gameplay that will clearly distinguish this year's entry from the previous one. So the same company can receive demerits for games not innovating enough, and at the same time — as with numerous forum posters who've tried the *Burnout Paradise* demo — be accused of having been too innovative.

The Goldilocksian taste buds of critics and

Sisters — to other areas of the game. But if you consider that neither *System Shock* nor *System Shock 2* were big hits, it might be fair to say that Ken Levine and his team took as many risks as they possibly could for a ten-hour-plus big-budget standalone game; unlike the even more praised *Portal*, *BioShock* didn't have the advantage of being bundled with one of gaming's most beloved franchises and the long-awaited sequel to one of the best multiplayer games ever made. But now, having been rewarded both critically and commercially for the risks that it did take, I expect *BioShock 2* will be even more daring, and in doing so, live up to the promises that the first game made but did not entirely keep.

During a preview event last year, when I asked Criterion creative director Alex Ward why he and his team had made Showtime mode so different from the Crash mode in previous *Burnouts*, he replied that the older games were still in gamers' collections and on store shelves, and that if people wanted that experience, they should simply replay the previous titles. Was that the correct approach, considering that *Paradise*'s open world could have clearly accommodated the series' traditional circuit races and crash junctions?

I'm torn, because had Criterion allowed itself the crutch of the old, they might not have pushed themselves hard enough to deliver the shock of the new. *Burnout Paradise* isn't perfect, but it is the finest realisation of an open-world racer to date, one that will almost certainly serve as a template to others who follow suit. And if reinvention is what it took to get there, I'd say that it's a price I'm willing to pay for this genre to take another step forward.

Besides, there's always the downloadable content, right?

*N'Gai Croal writes about technology for Newsweek. His blog can be found at [blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/](http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/levelup/)*

**A company can receive demerits for games not innovating enough, and at the same time be accused of having been too innovative**

destruction, anywhere and any time, under the new name of Showtime mode. There are a slew of other changes and tweaks, but the two I've focused on are those most likely to be cited by people who feel that This Is Not My *Burnout*.

Personally, I very much enjoy *Burnout Paradise*. But I cannot tell a lie: it took me the better part of an hour to properly warm up to the game, so different is its essence from that of its predecessors. The experience got me thinking about innovation, and whether or not it's the be-all or end-all for videogames. For innovation means taking a chance on something unproven, and in an age of rising budgets this can be a risky proposition. Criterion's parent

players alike — 'This game is too different!'; 'This game is not different enough!' — can represent something of a challenge to both original games as well as sequels. *BioShock* enjoyed a darn-near-celebratory run-up to its launch over the last two to three months of development, as a wider array of people got their hands on the code and could finally see how it well it had all come together. Yet, as various commentators have pointed out, the initial wave of hosannas had been followed a noticeable backlash. For my part, while I liked the game a lot, I found myself wishing that 2K Boston/Australia had extended what was perhaps its greatest innovation — the 'moral choice' of rescuing or harvesting the Little





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BY RANDY SMITH

## HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

Yes, but is it art?

Oh, man. That's the crappiest question of all time: what is the definition of art? Too bad we're going to think about it with respect to videogames.

Joseph Campbell's profound observation in his 1949 book *Hero With A Thousand Faces* was this: if all these cultures separated by time and space arrived at myths and stories with consistent elements, then there must be something fundamentally truthful about the human condition contained in those elements. Think of it as history's most elaborate research project, except instead of door-to-door polling we used archeology and anthropology. And the results were that no matter who you were or where and when you lived, somehow this small set of material served some important function in your life.

Looking at the material, you could say it's probably about the inevitability of change and

clawing so desperately to understand: how should I live my life? What is the right way to proceed with this predicament I find myself in? You're in it, too — what have you been able to figure out so far?

It's why we hang out in groups and drink beers and give each other advice (that and better to fend off sabre-toothed cats and raise our spawn collectively). And there is this gnawing suspicion that, because of the fundamental isolation we're all in, no one really understands us at all; maybe they're not even here, we're just imagining them. And nothing communicates 'this is what it's like to be sad' like a sad song, or a sad poem, or a sad painting. Suddenly we are reassured: this person does get it. They are here with me, somewhere nearby probably. Think about every time you read a book or watched a movie and couldn't get a certain piece of it out of your head. You kept running

winter. But find one of those that stuck with you and hold it in your head for a while, dig into it... Did you find a connection to something deeper? I usually do.

Videogames are not trying to be art; they already are art. Too often they are not explicitly designed to be relevant or honest, but even if art is not what's being manufactured, it's always at least a by-product. So what parts of videogames have you not been able to get out of your head? Riding your horse in *Shadow Of The Colossus*? Solos in *Rock Band*? The explosive paranoia of *BioShock*? The way E.T.'s head seemed to be uncomfortably gripped by an invisible hand when he levitated himself out of those pits?

Has any movie, song or painting ever really captured for you the feel of exploring an unfamiliar building or landscape or solar system the way videogames have? Let's indulge ourselves for a minute and just admit that we rock spatial exploration in a way no other art-form can touch (other than maybe weaving, of course). What else have we cornered the market on? Fear? The thrill of challenge? The intuitive maths of physical interactions? These are no small fries, either — these are major elements of the human experience.

This list underscores the value of expanding our range of topics outside of the physical domains, however. Even more importantly, there is a need to recognise that whether we mean to or not we're establishing a connection with our audience and presenting them with something we seem to believe about life. As videogames reach more and more people, this really ups the ante in terms of our responsibility, but also our opportunity: you're in this predicament, too. What have you been able to figure out so far?

*Randy Smith is a lead game designer at EA's LA studio. His current project is a collaboration with Steven Spielberg*

Has any movie, song or painting ever captured the feel of exploring an unfamiliar building or landscape the way videogames have?

death and the delicious comic irony that despite having been born with a primal need for connection with others, every person is ultimately isolated in their own head. Man, that one cracks me up every time. But wait, weren't we supposed to be talking about art?

I'm really into Bob McKee's thoughts on the subject. In his book *Story*, he says that relevance and honesty are necessary qualities for any screenplay worth a damn. Those are related qualities, because if you narrate events that your life experience has caused you to believe truly would happen, then you are being honest, and by extension you are sharing something you know about life. And this, McKee tells us, is what every living person is

your mind over it; you dreamed about it. Why that piece in particular? What relevance did it have for you?

In this sense, art is a piece of some Triforce you have to collect to beat your life. Other parts are spirituality, philosophy, science, and maybe something like making out with hot chicks at parties or Nutella or other fun stuff, maybe the two combined. All ways to come to an understanding about what the hell is going on.

It doesn't have to be an epic treatise on the meaning of life to make a contribution, either. It can capture something much more unassuming, like a particular type of smile or what it feels like to sled downhill in the





# 136-GAME BLOWOUT!

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BY MR BIFFO

## BIFFOVISION Grumble feature enabled

### Heroic Halo

Something profound happened to me last night: I lost my virginity. Also, I won my first online *Halo 3* tournament. This is probably no biggie to most of you, but I never once won a game of *Halo 2* — online or off. In fact, my experiences of playing *Halo 2* online so pooped in my opinion soup as far as online gaming goes that for a long time I didn't go anywhere near it. Plus, I spent some months desperately confused about my sexuality (after all, they couldn't all be wrong in their belief that I was a homosexual). Only *Call Of Duty 2* turned me around. For some inexplicable reason, here was a multiplayer game I could play. There was something about *Call Of Duty 2* that was unthreatening, and accessible, in a way that the *Halo* series never has been.

And then my Xbox 360's wireless connection choked to death, and I didn't play online games for almost a year. And then my

leaderboard. My third game I won conclusively, a good eight points ahead of my nearest competition. I know this is preaching to the converted, and stating the bleeding obvious, but my crikey did that feel good. It was genuinely one of the biggest gaming highs I've ever had.

This is a terrible confession for someone who spent just over ten years reviewing games for a living, but I'm fairly crap at games. Well, I'm better than the man in the street, and my friend Anthony, but I've never had the patience to get really good.

I don't think I ever finished a single game on my dear old ZX Spectrum. Admittedly, games then were far more unforgiving than they are today, but even today I tend not to have the stamina to finish every game. This is something I probably really shouldn't be admitting, but there were very few games we played all the way through when I was writing Digitiser.

bored still, mind. *John Woo's Stranglehold* is a case in point. Initially I was disappointed that the graphics failed to come anywhere close to matching the glorious screenshots that had lured me in, but the action was fun enough. Unfortunately, the game failed to evolve. The levels quickly became repetitious, and it was fairly apparent that once I'd played the first four levels I'd played them all.

I think that's the key to keeping my interest in a game. I want every stage, every section, to feel like a fresh experience. *Assassin's Creed* is a game I was surprised to like, given the mixed nature of its reviews. The action gets a bit samey, but I found the environment changing just enough to keep my interest. *Half-Life 2* — and its episodes — keep throwing new ideas at the player in a way that the *Halo* series never has, while every one of the cornerstone *Mario* titles — from *Super Mario Bros* to *Yoshi's Island* to *Super Mario Galaxy* — has made sure that every level is a new game almost, while always staying true to the basic underlying rules of its universe.

Likewise Valve's *Portal*. It's effectively one idea, but that one idea is explored from every conceivable angle. You can almost sense its development team experimenting as you play, doubtless being as surprised as you are by the endless flexibility of one simple, headline gaming conceit. Hence, the game never gets boring. Hence, you play through to the end, even though the levels all look the same.

Perhaps this is why I now find myself itching for another go of *Halo 3* online. For now at least winning at a *Halo* game is a markedly new experience. If I win all the time maybe it'll get boring. Mind you, there's as much chance of that happening as there is of me getting through a game without being called a 'faggot'.

*Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television*

### Portal is effectively one idea, but you can almost sense its development team experimenting as you play

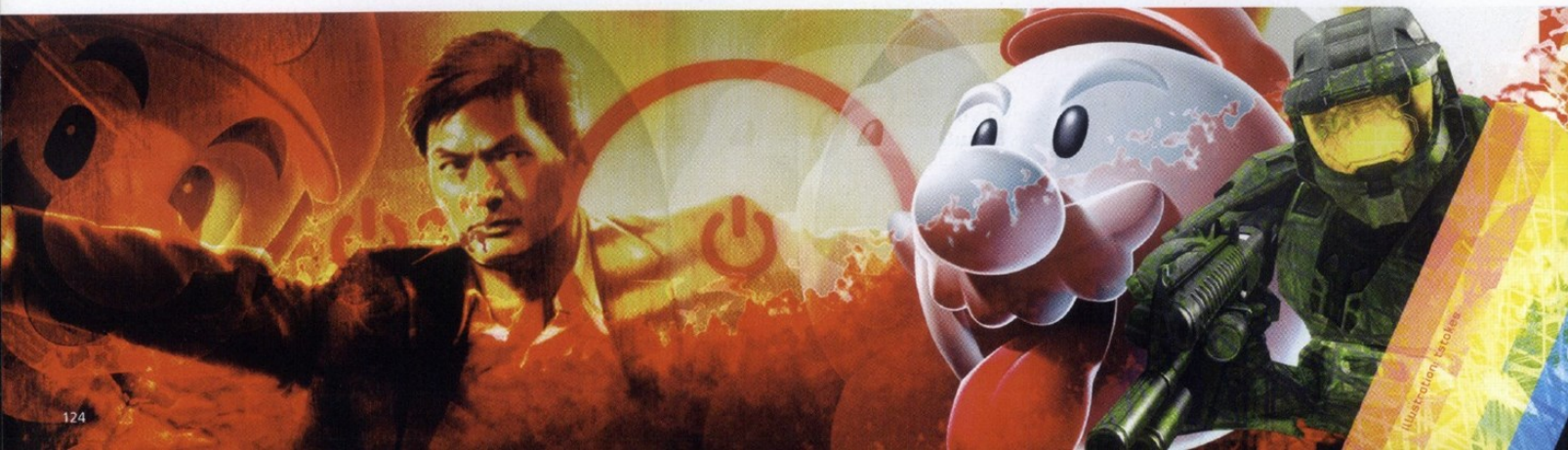
Xbox 360 died, the infamous Red Ring of Death signalling that I was either going to have to go through the hassle of sending it back to Microsoft for repair, or buy a new one (I went for the latter: Christmas was looming, and the thought of not having *Call Of Duty 4* to play on the big day was far too painful to contemplate).

Given my experiences with its predecessor, *Halo 3* was not my first choice of online game. Unfortunately, I'm no great fan of *Call Of Duty 3*, and I couldn't find my beloved *Call Of Duty 2*. And the headset wasn't working very well, so *Team Fortress 2* was a bit of a pointless experience. *Halo 3* it had to be. I lost my first game spectacularly. My second game I fared slightly better, finishing about halfway up the

Admittedly, that was out of necessity — too many games, so little staff — but it rarely came back to bite us on the crackle.

In fact, in ten years of Digitiser I can remember only one occasion where it had repercussions. I think it was *Cannon Fodder 2*, where a member of our modest team of Amiga reviewers marked the game down because it didn't have drivable vehicles, unlike a similar point-and-click shooter that had been released a few months earlier. It was a stupid mistake that we never repeated, by making sure we never said anything specific about a game ever again.

Nevertheless, now that I can pick and choose the games I play I generally tend to complete them these days. There are times when I get







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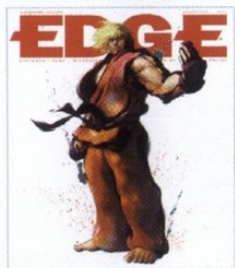
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# inbox



Issue 184

## F ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from  
*Edge Online's*  
discussion forum

### Topic: Machiavellian games

Has anyone ever played a game where you have to subtly manipulate events to your advantage? Have you ever arranged an illegal sale and then called the police or committed a crime and planted evidence to make someone else look guilty? Told an NPC that you've seen their partner going into a motel with someone else? Spread rumours? Some of these things would be very difficult to program but I can't think of anyone even trying.  
*freethinker*

As far as manipulating enemies and that kind of thing, *BioShock* has ample use of pitting enemies against each other. It's quite enjoyable once you get the hang of it.  
*Bugul*

In *Mass Effect* last night, I told a woman I was going to spy on this businessman for her. I then proceeded to go and tell the guy about what she was up to. I then lied to her saying I had done it, and got a lot of credits from her.  
*Mattyj*

■ With regards to the issue of trying to find enough time to play games, I say this: it is not our fault. The 360 has, in particular, had a very claustrophobic release schedule since the end of the summer.

That has put a direct strain on 360 gamers' free time – I'm sure that you won't find many Wii or PS3 owners complaining of a surplus of games vying for their attention. Also, it seems to have damaged the online communities of several games that have previously enjoyed healthy support.

## The 360 has had a very claustrophobic release schedule, and that has put a strain on its owners' free time, and damaged its online communities

I feel that *PGR4* is a good example. The game was released close to a few other racing genre releases, and of course, too close to the overpowering *Halo 3*. The online support of *PGR4* compared to *PGR3* is significantly less and the game has recently suffered the dreaded vote of confidence in the form of a price cut in one high street games shop within a mere few months of release. Obviously, there were fewer 360 owners when *PGR3* arrived but there were also relatively fewer online games available to buy at the time.

I'm sure that during that time, people actually had the same amount of time to play games as they do now but they were able to focus on the games that they owned, gained a greater return on their investment, and generally enjoyed themselves more.

Surely, for everyone who has some form of investment in the 360, a more controlled and considered release schedule would provide some breathing space and an opportunity for games to be savoured and IP to grow.

As for *PGR4*, I'm sure that as it was released within three months of the big day a lot of the casual players were unable to see past the *Juiced*s and *Need For Speed*s of the world. As a result, the game seems to have been overlooked, or maybe it is a more significant insight into the split between Bizarre Creations and Microsoft and the tidal wave of coverage that the Chief received.

Is it possible that *Halo 3* may have done more damage in the long run than good? Maybe gamers are also struggling to find time to play any other games

while the Master Chief reigns supreme. Or maybe Microsoft has not sold enough systems.

**Paul Powell**

This is an issue we discussed in these pages some time ago, and it's certainly not going to go away soon. What about a game like *Drake's Fortune*? It's plenty of fun for the relatively few hours it lasts, but how do you feel when you finish it? Do you wish that you could play its particular brand of running and gunning against a friend? Or, with the amount of other games up there on your shelf, is it somehow a strange sort of relief that you're done and dusted with it, and ready to make a clean break for the next challenge?

■ As a lecturer in politics, and someone who is attempting to demonstrate to the academic community the merits of looking at videogames more seriously, I am a little unsure what to make of your discussion of whether or not games should be any



The best letter  
wins a DS Lite

more than games (E184, p77). While your sentiment has merit for some games, you are surely over-playing the extent of the shift from games as games to games with 'higher' purpose.

*BlackSite* stands out partly because it is not particularly good, but arguably it should be applauded for attempting to engage with politics and political issues. It may not succeed, but it is arguably the first mainstream game to engage directly with political issues in a serious way. Maybe *BlackSite* stands as the equivalent of the film *Blood Diamond* – essentially throwaway but important in the sense that it brings politics to an audience who might not be exposed to it otherwise.

The real power of film, of course, is that it has been able to engage with myriad emotions and issues through a single medium. Consider the numbers of people exposed to political issues such as Vietnam, McCarthyism or Northern Ireland through film. Even mainstream action films such as the Bourne movies or *Enemy Of The State* contain a message about the capacity of absolute power to corrupt.

In fact, rather than sharing the sentiment of *Edge* that games should be games, why not share the view that they should be good? The desire for *BlackSite* to engage with serious



political issues should be applauded, and is indicative of a medium which is becoming increasingly confident to engage with such themes. If games can learn one thing from films it is not to try to ape their style but it is instead to ape the scope of the forms of emotions which they can engender. When games can become both games but also much more than games surely we will all be better off.

**Dr Nick Robinson**

We're absolutely, positively behind games being used for the greater good, but if, in this particular instance, we're talking about bringing politics to an audience unused to being confronted with such themes in gaming, can't doing so in a lame manner only be a bad thing, and likely to dissuade the consumer from sampling such themes again? Whatever the case, take this new DS Lite with you on your next mission to educate those pesky academic types.



Nick Robinson suggests that we should have taken *BlackSite's* political ambitions more seriously, if only to encourage further work in the area, and a rise in gaming's profile

island after being flown there by the producer of the same film. Why should the games industry be treated any differently?

In the case of Gerstmann, the position is even more worrying. GameSpot were reliant on Eidos' advertising revenue – in essence Eidos money was part of GameSpot's very lifeblood. How then can we expect a balanced judgment from GameSpot on

## On paper, the Wii is nowhere near as advanced a piece of hardware as the 360. But you know what? It looks cool when watching other people play

Noting the current trend of videogame journalists being 'flown out' by publishers to report on the up-and-coming blockbusters has got me thinking about reviewer impartiality. The news of GameSpot's firing of editor Jeff Gerstmann, reputedly due to pressure from Eidos after his pasting of *Kane & Lynch*, further exacerbated my concerns.

There seems little doubt that the industry is getting more advertising and marketing savvy. Meanwhile, competing games journalism publications are reliant on all-important exclusive previews, reviews, etc, to obtain their killer hooks. Publishers realising this are in a position to capitalise by generating hype machines through PR events – this seems an obvious perk for the journalists on the receiving end. Do questions of reciprocity then not arise? For example, I would be deeply suspicious if Jonathan Ross were to sing praises of a major motion picture from the shores of a Caribbean

any Eidos game? Perhaps we did, Gertsmann delivered, and ultimately paid the price with his job.

The ugly truth seems to be that the games journalists need the publishers and their deep pockets as much as the publishers need the endorsement of the gaming press. It is an unfortunate but necessary incestuous relationship. However, I do feel that reviewer integrity does need to be questioned and further scrutinised, which regrettably throws further complication in basing your purchase decisions on a number at the end of a review.

**Ravi Jariwala**

There are a number of specific points that need to be made here. First, journalists jetting around the world to attend game-related events isn't a 'current trend' – it's been happening for over 20 years. Second, the movie press is probably on the receiving end of many more trips than the gaming press. Third, and most important, you must understand that such trips are

**F**

**Topic: The serious thread**

The question is simple: do you want games to be taken seriously? Many people complained about the *Manhunt 2* ban, saying that the equivalent film (eg, *Saw*) would have gotten through the BBFC with minimum hassle. Yet, when a game like *Full Spectrum Warrior* comes out where, and no joke, every Muslim in the game is a terrorist, we fall back on the 'it's just a game' defence. So, are they just games, which we shouldn't think too seriously about? Or are games a medium demanding the same respect as film, literature, TV and music?

**Childintime**

Whether or not games ever achieve artistic recognition, or are deemed worthy of acute critical debate, it won't for a second effect my enjoyment of them. Give it 20-100 years. Maybe then, videogame themes, content and levels of interaction will have evolved from: 'Take gun, shoot shoot SHOOT' and: 'Wave wand to bake cake' to something palpable that is actually worth discussing on an emotional and academic level.

**Turtle O Wurtle**

If you think of classic films, such as *Casablanca*, they are classic due to the story. The love between the characters, the setting, etc. Classic games are where you killed things, ie *Space Invaders*, *Asteroids* and so on. Games have had to evolve to become more emotionally involved, or at least regarded as such, whereas other media have had it from the start.

**mattyj**

Can you imagine anyone in the 20 years following *Train Pulling Into A Station* talking about mise en scene? There's no eureka moment with these things, they simply take time to develop a critical language and disseminate into the collective consciousness. We just ain't quite there yet.

**The Conge**

undertaken (by **Edge** staffers, at least; let's not try to speak for everyone working in the gaming media) with a purpose – which is work, not sitting around sipping cocktails and stuffing our faces. Finally, we *really* don't need to say right here that advertisers do not in any way influence the content of **Edge's** reviews, do we? Because that would be the mark of a dark day indeed.

In E182, in the sidebar after quoting Miyamoto in regards to whether Japanese players would necessarily want to upgrade to the N64 from the Super Famicom, you wrote: '[Miyamoto's quote] was less of a criticism of new hardware than an acknowledgment that, in Japan at least, specs will always be less important than what you do with them.'

We are talking about the same Japan here, correct? The Japan that invented the CD? The DVD? Blu-ray, HD-DVD, the Walkman, LCDs, etc?

As the electronic and technological Mecca of the world, specs and hardware have always been important to Japan. If hardware was less important to Japan than what you do with it, then why did every Japanese DS owner buy an additional unit when it was redesigned with a higher-spec screen? Both models play the same DS games. Or why was DVD adopted over VHS? Both do exactly the same thing.

I just don't buy it (no pun intended). I think people like new and exciting things. And on paper, sure: the Wii is nowhere near as advanced a piece of hardware as the 360. But you know what? It looks cool when watching other people play. It looks new and fresh and exciting. And it's that newness and sense of curiosity that makes the Wii and DS look high-tech. We've been sitting like this (insert picture of hunched-over gamer with gripping classic-style controller in hands) for over 20 years. So when you see people waving a Remote around while standing up, or using the stylus on the DS to draw while speaking into the microphone, it's going to look high-tech because no one has ever seen anything like that before.

So while mainstream Japanese game players may not be combing system specs and making comparisons with one

*Continued*



another about clock speed and fill rates, the fact that the DS and Wii offer fresh, new ways to play lends the impression – or rather the illusion – that the hardware is new and high-spec. And if that is indeed the case, then specs in fact do matter, if for nothing more than to provide an insurance policy that this new hardware will provide you with the best experience technology has to offer.

**Stink**

And yet this is the same Japan that is holding on to its DVD collections and proving as reluctant as other nations in upgrading to high-def movie formats, and the same Japan that ensured new iterations of the *Dragon Quest* series would sell more copies than anything released on more technologically advanced platforms. The point simply was that, despite the obvious matter of Japan being home to so many developments in AV tech, content appears to remain very much king.

**F**

**Topic: Your most memorable gaming moments of 2007**  
*BioShock* – that bit when Cohen loses it and sends an army of splicers after you. And then Waltz of the Flowers kicks in. It's a perfectly realised moment of 'gun ballet'. It felt too good, like it was a scripted cutscene, yet you were playing it in all its emergent glory.  
**Blocks100**

Climbing the Agency Tower in *Crackdown* – the music and the leaps of faith made the climb a treat, and the visual payoff at the top was awesome.  
**The Conge**

*Forza 2*: being single-handedly responsible for flooding the market with 'that anime burd' decal. I managed to find ONE of them going for something like 20,000 unlocked, saw my chance and made something ridiculous like 4/5 million.  
**The Second Unit**

Last night was enjoyably spent in an extended *Team Fortress 2* session. As fantastic as it was, however, Valve's game raises questions: how should we consider the online component of games?

Revisiting *Ocarina Of Time*, the graphics have dated, but it is still that same sensational experience as when released almost a decade ago, as will be the case with *Mario Galaxy*. Ten years down the line with *Halo 3*, we'll still have that singleplayer but, assuming Xbox Live is even still functioning, we might end up having to play multiplayer with a small clique of ridiculously good fans on whatever hardcore mode has become the norm.

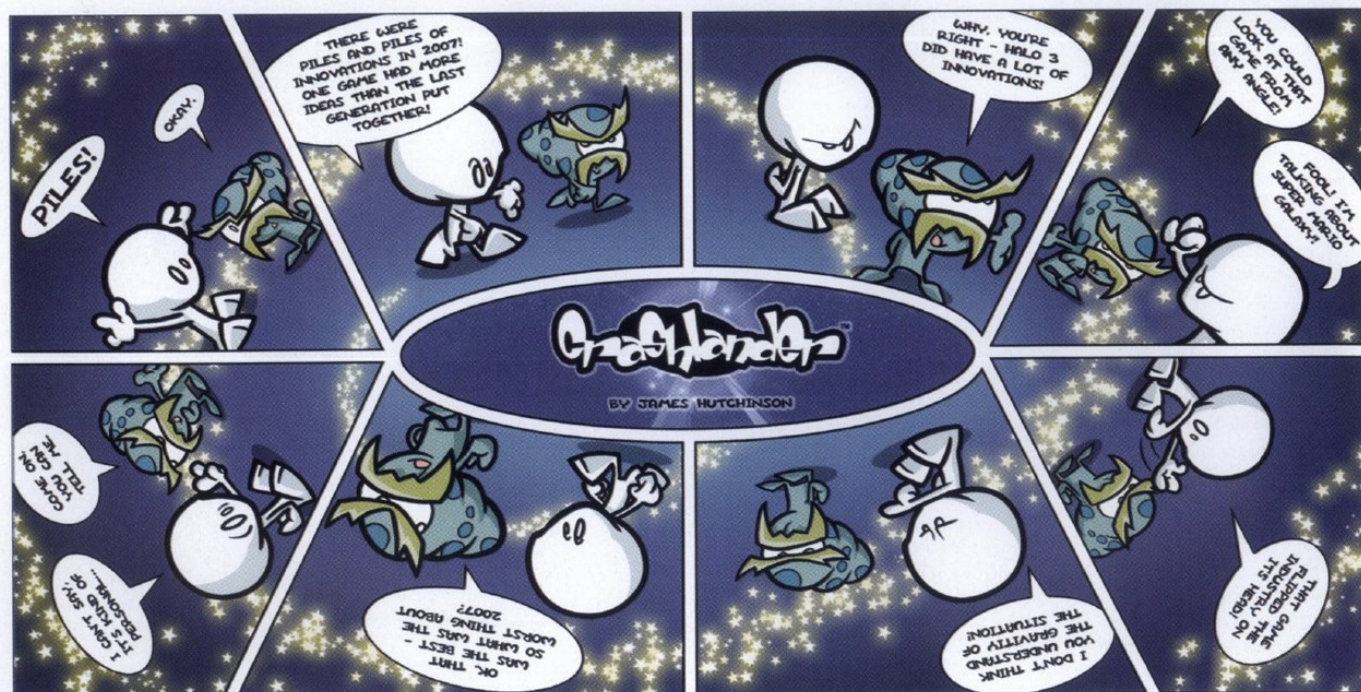
As a long-time PC gamer, I'm certainly not saying that online cannot greatly add to a game. Indeed, online gaming freely disregards much of the associated fluff stolen from film that so many singleplayer experiences continue to rely on, and thus often achieves a

pinnacle of pure gaming enjoyment. I've spent many hours on *Counter-Strike*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Battlefield 2*, etc, but it remains that the transient nature of their players, and greater feeling of 'similar but better' sequels, often makes it hard to appreciate them as 'classics' as easily as a player returning to *Mario 64* will still be impressed.

Unfortunately, I come without any answers, only questions. However, it might be the case that we won't actually need any answers. *Counter-Strike* is still thriving, so perhaps, if the multiplayer is really that good, online communities will continue for... well, for a very, very long time!

**John Lynch**

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